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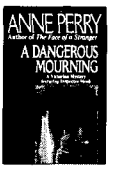
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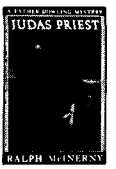
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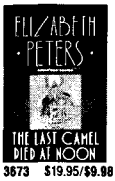
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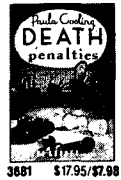
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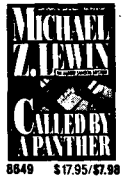
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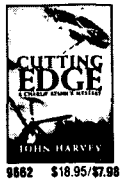
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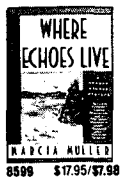
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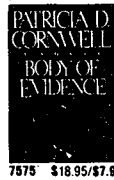
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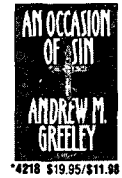
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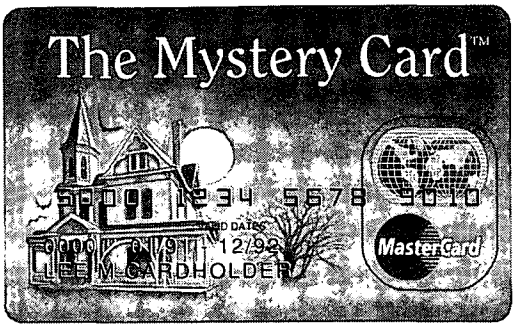
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Bouchercon .22 is barely over (at this writing), but already reservation forms are being mailed out for Bouchercon XXIII. If you think you would like to attend this annual convention of mystery readers and writers (with a few editors, agents, and assorted other interested parties in attendance as well), it is probably a good idea to get your reservation in now, especially to be sure of securing a room at the convention hotel.

The convention will take place in Toronto on October 8-11, 1992, at the Royal York Hotel. The guest of honor will be Margaret Millar; the toastmaster will be Mysterious Press publisher Otto Penzler; a Lifetime Achievement Award will be presented to Charlotte MacLeod. There will be discussion panels on many aspects of the mystery, a mystery film festival, a "murder" to solve, a wine and cheese party, an historical tour of Toronto, a book dealers' room, and a dinner dance.

For an application, write to the World Mystery Convention, P.O. Box 23, Station "S," Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5M 4L6. The Royal York Hotel rate for convention-goers (in Canadian dollars) is $119. The fee for membership in the convention is $60 (U.S.) or $70 (Canadian funds), unless you can get your registration in before December thirty-first—if so, the fee is ten dollars less.

Finally . . . we would like to thank one of our readers for

(continued on page 54)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Elana Lore,** Managing Editor; **Terri Czeczko,** Art Director; **Ron Kuliner,** Associate Art Director; **Michael McCarthy,** Designer; **Carole Dixon,** Production Director; **Cynthia Manson,** Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough,** Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty,** Circulation Director; **Phyllis Jessen,** Circulation Planning Director; **Christian Dorbandt,** Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones,** Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan,** Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki,** Classified Advertising Director; **Barbara Zinkhen,** Classified Advertising Manager; **Judy Dorman,** Advertising Coordinator (New York: 212-557-9100).

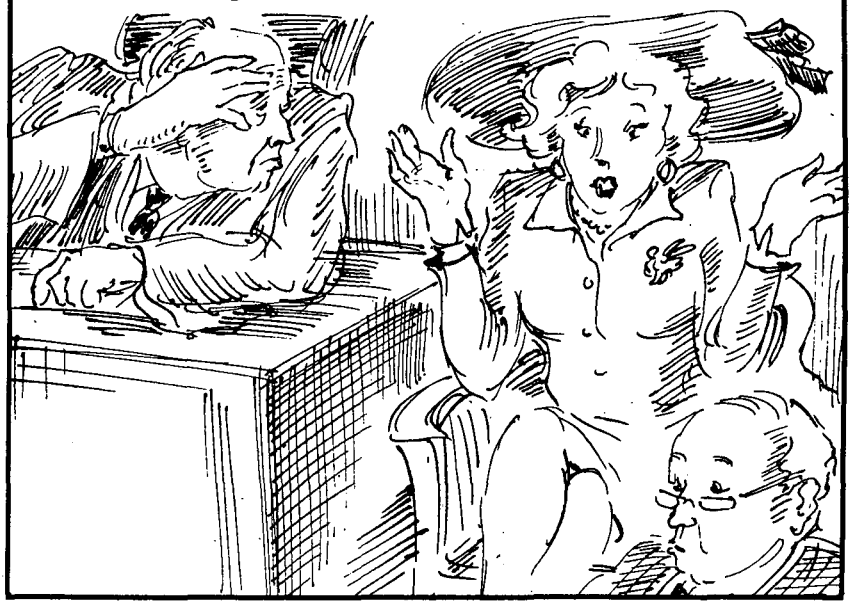
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FICTION

Driving Ms. Crazy

by P. K. Schossau



"Ms. Rickert, you can't go on being a menace to public roads and highways."

"Your Honor, I never *meant* to be a menace, it's just my schedule—"

"Your schedule?"

"I mean my customer appointments. It's very important for a businessperson to be punctual—"

"Exactly what is your business, Ms. Rickert?"

"Beau Jolie Beauty, Your Honor."

"I beg your pardon . . . "

"I'm a Beau Jolie Beauty consultant, Your Honor, and although you might think it's not an important job, it really is. Do you

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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understand, beauty is more than just being pretty, for some people it's the way they *live,* it's more important than anything. I mean, you probably think it's nice that I look like I do—"

"Er—you are a very attractive young lady."

"—but I'm sure it has more of an effect on you than you realize, and some of my customers really *need* what I can give them, as much as they need food or water or—"

"And you were driving sixty-nine miles an hour in a thirty-five zone so you would not keep your customers waiting for their makeup."

"It's not just makeup, Your Honor. Besides, you see, I'm a professional, and it's *professionalism* that matters here."

"And is it professional to violate the law?"

"Your Honor, I pride myself on meeting my commitments."

"I see. Well, then, perhaps it will make an impression on you if I suspend your license for ninety days."

"Oh, sir—oh, please, Your Honor, don't do that! My clients—my being unable to drive would be a terrible hardship for all of us—"

"The court would rather you didn't cry, Ms. Rickert. Surely you see that court-ordered fines and even the driving improvement course have failed to improve your habits, so something must be done."

"Oh, sir, Your Honor, judge sir, give me a chance to prove I can change."

"You have already shown—a total of nine times, I believe—that the right kind of change is elusive."

"But if I can't drive, I can't do my job—"

"I understand your difficulty, Ms. Rickert, but if I don't do something, I will in effect be taking responsibility for your lack of judgment, and for whatever damage or injuries you cause. Do you realize that two million Americans die or are seriously injured every year in car accidents? If that kind of carnage occurred in any other way, there would be an uproar that would shake the country, but we are all firm in our conviction that the right to individual transportation is as fundamentally American as freedom of the press. You are not part of the solution to this situation, Ms. Rickert, you're part of the problem."

"But I couldn't make my living if I couldn't drive."

"You've already made that point, Ms. Rickert, but I—now, now, Ms. Rickert. Perhaps—we may regret this, but perhaps you would benefit from involvement in a new program. You may, in fact, be precisely the sort of citizen for which this program—"

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"I'll try anything, Your Honor."

"Don't thank me yet, Ms. Rickert. You may not find it entirely to your liking."

"I'll like it fine, Your Honor, just fine."

"All right, Ms. Rickert. Hand this to the bailiff. Next case."

"Ms. Rickert, I had hoped never to see you before this court again."

"I did my best, I really tried, Your Honor. It's a technical problem, really."

"Technical problem? Can you explain that?"

"You see, the high heels make the A.V.C.U. drive too fast, but of course I didn't realize—"

"High heels? Ms. Rickert, I'm asking for an explanation of how you managed to exceed the speed limit *despite* the fact your car was being controlled by a court-provided Auxiliary Vehicle Control Unit."

"Yes, Your Honor, I know. And it was actually the high heels—"

"Ms. Rickert, what do high heels have to do with the A.V.C.U.?"

"She was wearing them. Maybe they're a little too high, although I think a three-inch heel is only appropriate for business attire—"

"Ms. Rickert, stop talking, just—stop talking for a moment. Thank you. Now, are you trying to tell me you have put high heels on your A.V.C.U.?"

"Well, of course."

"The court may regret asking, but why?"

"Naturally I couldn't go to my appointments driven by that naked *thing*. I have my image to consider."

"That 'thing' is a machine, Ms. Rickert. Machines are not naked; they do not require clothing to be functional."

"But it looks like a person—"

"Only insofar as it has been designed to operate your vehicle without requiring modifications to the vehicle itself. The fact that it has two arms and two legs and a head is merely an engineering constraint, so it can drive a car designed for humans much as a human being does—in your case, better, the court fervently hopes. It does not require clothing of any kind."

"But, Your Honor, no one told me I couldn't dress her—"

" 'It,' if you please."

"—it, so I just picked out a nice navy blue knit that complements her coloring, you know, something that doesn't make her too sallow, and she really looks quite stunning with platinum hair—cut

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short seemed best, because after all she *is* a working girl—"

"You put a wig on her—it?"

"Well, of course. And the navy blue pumps look very nice, although I'll admit they were a little tight and I had to squeeze them on, so they look a little like she has some swelling, but of course lots of people—"

"Stop—please stop, Ms. Rickert. Just stop."

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"Understand, Ms. Rickert—this court will tolerate no insolence."

"Oh, no, Your Honor! I would never—"

"I hesitate to consider what kind of damage this obsession of yours has done to a most promising new program. Do you realize, Ms. Rickert, this invention could bring a substantial increase in safety to our streets and highways, and remarkable levels of new freedom to the handicapped? And yet you, Ms. Rickert, put high heels on it.

"If it weren't that this was one of the first trials of the A.V.C.U. Program, I would simply suspend your license and be done with it. As it is, I must order you to cease and desist in tampering with the A.V.C.U., to return it to its original condition so it can function in the manner for which it was designed. Either that—Ms. Rickert, the court cannot be disrupted by another emotional display. Please bring yourself under control."

"But I'd just die! If I took her clothes off now, it would be like driving around with a *nudist* or something, and I'm sure that *must* be against the law—"

"I appreciate your sensitivity to the law more than anyone, Ms. Rickert, but I repeat, the A.V.C.U. is not a human being. Its lack of clothing therefore does not cause the kind of legal or social impact you're concerned about."

"But my customers would be mortified—and they all think she looks just wonderful, especially with the accessories."

"Accessories? I wasn't aware the A.V.C.U. had optional parts."

"Oh, I mean a scarf, and some bangles. Nothing too flirtatious, you know, but something that jingles a little when she moves her arms—"

"Ms. Rickert, I don't think the court can continue this discussion in good countenance. Can you please confine your comments to the subject?"

"I'm really trying, Your Honor. Sir, it seems to me the subject is whether I can still conduct my business without being—er, impaired by having to be driven around by a *machine*—"

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"Not precisely, Ms. Rickert. But in either case, the court orders you to remove the high heels. Otherwise you will be remanded to—"

"No, Your Honor, I'll take them off!"

"Thank you, Ms. Rickert. I trust I won't be seeing you again. Next case."

"Is it possible that you are standing before me yet again, Ms. Rickert?"

"I'm really sorry, Your Honor, but it wasn't anything I did."

"The court would very much like to believe that, but reality is what it is. To avoid any of the confusion we've suffered in the past, the court will ask just one question: how did you come to be traveling at a speed of fifty-two miles per hour in a twenty-five zone?"

"I really don't know, Your Honor, but I think maybe the A.V.C.U. isn't working entirely well, although it seems so accommodating and it really tries hard to do what I ask, *without,* of course, breaking the law—"

"Ms. Rickert, did you remove the high heels from the A.V.C.U.?"

"Yes, Your Honor, of course, right after you told me to."

"And do you swear you have in no way modified the A.V.C.U. such that it could not function as designed?"

"No, sir, Your Honor, I wouldn't do that."

"The court would also like to believe that, but . . . bailiff, I see no recourse but to hold Ms. Rickert's case over while the firm that manufactures the A.V.C.U. examines the unit and confirms its reliability. Next case."

"I see Ms. Rickert has returned to grace this court once more. Bailiff, is that the report from the A.V.C.U.'s manufacturer?"

"Yes, Your Honor, but—"

"Please hand it over."

"Yes, sir, Your Honor, but—"

"One moment, please, while I read the report . . . is this the whole report, bailiff? This one that says only 'A.V.C.U. Number 6-1247-A passes all diagnostics without failure'?"

"Yes, sir."

"They made no effort to explain how it was possible for the A.V.C.U. to drive in a reckless manner?"

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"No, sir."

"This is most disappointing to the court. It appears the A.V.C.U. cannot be relied upon—"

"Your Honor, if I could interrupt. Driver-drone Manufacturing also recommended the court examine the A.V.C.U. in person—er, directly."

"This is a most irregular request. This court relies on expert testimony for such things as functional analyses of machines, and *they* are the experts."

"They said it was all they could suggest, since they guarantee the A.V.C.U. was operating as designed, and the design has been thoroughly tested by the state."

"Then the only alternative would seem to be—oh, all right, bailiff. Is it possible to bring the A.V.C.U. into the court?"

"Uh, yes. It's already here, Your Honor."

"Is it? What was that, bailiff—speak up."

"The one in the chauffeur's—er, the black uniform. In the wheelchair."

"I . . . see."

"Your Honor, should I bring the A.V.C.U. to the bench?"

"We . . . bailiff, why is the thing in the wheelchair?"

"I guess it can't walk, Your Honor. Doesn't need to, you know, to do its job."

"Interesting. Yes, bailiff, bring the machine—yes, Ms. Rickert?"

"Your Honor, may I say something?"

"Hazardous as it may be to permit you—yes."

"I just want to say that my A.V.C.U. has made every effort to do a good job and shouldn't be punished for one little mistake."

"Ms. Rickert, a machine can neither make a mistake nor be punished for it. The court cautions you to refrain from anthropomorphizing unduly."

"Your Honor?"

"From treating the device as if it were a human being."

"But—yes, sir."

"Furthermore, I must warn you that the A.V.C.U. is not 'yours,' but is the property of the state. Any damage to or alteration of state property is, of course, a prosecutable offense. Do I make myself clear, Ms. Rickert?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"The A.V.C.U. may approach the—that is, bailiff, bring the A.V.C.U. closer. Who is this young man?"

"Sir, he's a representative of Driver-drone Manufacturing."

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"I'm relieved to hear it. Step forward, young man—don't be nervous. What is your name?"

"Sir, judge—um, Your Honor, I'm Robert Holiman."

"An employee of Driver-drone Manufacturing."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"You have verified the function of the Auxiliary Vehicle Control Unit next to you?"

"Well, I ran standard diagnostics, which all passed."

"But I notice you haven't answered my question: have you verified the function?"

"Your Honor, I can't exactly say that, not in those words."

"What words would you prefer to use?"

"Um, the unit functions properly in all measurable aspects."

"Young man, I don't intend to spend my time playing word games with you. Just what are you trying to say?"

"You see, Your Honor, the problem is, the A.V.C.U. is an intelligent device."

"A fact we can hope justifies the enormous expense. But what does the unit's intelligence have to do with proper function?"

"Well, you see, the unit is constantly learning. You can't put a rigidly programmed machine on the street because conditions are constantly changing. An inflexible program would never keep up with the weather, or traffic problems, or—"

"Your point is taken, Mr. Holiman. But what does it *mean?*"

"It means we can run diagnostics to make sure the unit is functioning properly in all the nonmodifiable behavior areas—like basic capabilities for staying on the road, avoiding collisions, orienting itself to the geography, and mapping its progress, things like that. But there are plenty of things a unit like this learns that we can't really, um, keep track of."

"This court may or may not follow you entirely, Mr. Holiman. But let me ask my question in a simpler way: can you confirm that the unit consistently obeys traffic laws?"

"Well—"

"Well what, young man?"

"Well, no, sir, I can't."

"What possible use is the device if it can't be guaranteed to obey the law?"

"But, sir, Your Honor, let me explain. You see, the programming has to be flexible enough to permit discretion in obeying laws."

"That isn't what we learned in law school, young man—or Driver's Education either, for that matter."

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"But take, for example, a situation where a collision is imminent—the fault of a pedestrian or another driver, of course—but can be avoided by swerving onto an empty street that happens to be a one-way street, the *wrong* way. The A.V.C.U.'s highest priority is to prevent injury or damage in a collision, so it would turn onto the one-way street. Isn't that the way you'd want it?"

"Well, perhaps I can imagine one or two occasions—"

"The processors in the A.V.C.U. have to make decisions about the developing situation by balancing its knowledge of the law with what it has learned from its driving experiences. And, once the unit has hit the streets, its experiences are going to be completely unique."

"Are you saying, Mr. Holiman, that the A.V.C.U. might possibly learn something that would lead it to violate the law intentionally?"

"Er—yes, sir, Your Honor."

"I see."

"Uh—Your Honor, can I go now?"

"No, Mr. Holiman. One other question: since you have brought this device into the court, we presume we can somehow examine the education it has received. If we want to find out what the A.V.C.U. has learned since it 'hit the streets,' as you put it, how do we go about it? Can't you simply look at whatever is inside?"

"We, um, we couldn't actually 'see' what it's learned because each of the five processors learns according to its own—"

"A moment, Mr. Holiman. Five processors?"

"Yes, sir, there are five separate computers, each programmed to learn and reach conclusions in its own way."

"But which one makes the decisions?"

"They all do—I mean, each of the three best-functioning processors votes on what to do."

"Commendably democratic. What do the other two do?"

"They step in if there's a failure in any of the others."

"I see. But surely you could examine each of the processors—"

"Excuse me, ju—Your Honor, but I don't think you realize how complex the interactions between five processors can be."

"If the way this case is developing is any indication, I'm afraid I do. But there must be some way to determine *how* the machine will respond in any given situation."

"Uh, I guess we could do a diagnostic query. But it would be pretty hard to create just the right set of questions. Mmmm . . . no, actually I think a simulation would be better."

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"A simulation of driving conditions?"

"Yes, sir—in fact, a re-creation of the conditions in which the unit, er, performed unpredictably might be just the thing."

"How do you propose we do that, Mr. Holiman?"

"Go for a ride?"

"You're proposing this court convene in Ms. Rickert's car to re-create the circumstances of the violation."

"That's it, Your Honor."

"I see. I see. Mr. Holiman, how safe do you consider the A.V.C.U. to be?"

"Oh, completely safe. I have one in my car—a prototype, since I can't afford a line model, but letting it drive is much more relaxing than driving myself."

"All right, Mr. Holiman. Since this case is of such particular importance in establishing legal precedent, this court will re-convene in Ms. Rickert's vehicle in one hour. You're invited, Mr. Holiman."

"Yes, Your Honor, um, thank you."

"Bailiff, make the arrangements. Court adjourned."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Dabney, but can't you perhaps move your recording machinery a little to one side? It's digging into—"

"Oh! Oh, I'm very sorry, Your Honor! It's just I've never had to work in the back seat of a car—"

"Don't be upset, Mrs. Dabney. I've never had to convene court in a pink two-door either. Are you in, Mr. Holiman?"

"Could you just squeeze over a little more—ooph! Thank you, sir."

"Ms. Rickert, I believe we'll want this to be over as soon as possible. Are you ready to begin?"

"I think his hat's over his eyes a little—"

"Removing the hat is probably the best thing to do, Ms. Rickert. I doubt the unit will suffer too greatly from the violation of fashion. Court is now in session. Let us please remember that all parties are subject to penalty for perjury just as if we were in the court-room, where we doubtless belong. Ms. Rickert, I suggest you start the vehicle and travel with all due caution to your residence."

"My place, judge?"

"I believe that is where you were coming from on the day in question, is it not? We are about to re-create your route of that day, in the period leading up to the violation."

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"All right, Your Honor."

"Mr. Holiman, would you please explain, for the benefit of the court and the recorder, what it is that's happening."

"Uh, sure. Ms. Rickert has to start the engine, which also initiates the power-up sequence in the A.V.C.U. You can see by the way the grid in the faceplate lights up that it's on-line."

"On-line, Mr. Holiman?"

"Powered up and communicating with all peripherals—in this case, the vehicle's data readouts, and the input voice coder."

"So the device accepts voice commands. Does it also talk?"

"No, sir, there's not much need for that—although it does have a small message display bar here, so any special information can be provided to the operator."

"Ms. Rickert, the court would very much appreciate it if you would remove the wig from the A.V.C.U. It's obstructing our vision."

"Oh, but, Your Honor, I really don't like bald men—I mean, you know, no offense, but I prefer—"

"Let the court remind you that the A.V.C.U. is not a man, any more than it was formerly a woman. And no offense taken, but please remove the wig."

"But—oh, if you say so."

"Please continue, Mr. Holiman."

"You see how the unit has several adjunct lever-engagers attached at the, er, chest, which makes it possible for the unit to operate the gearshift, turning signals controls, and so on without ever removing its, um, hands from the steering wheel. Sort of an improvement, heh heh, on the original design . . . so now it's shifting into Reverse. Notice how the light grid pattern changed as it checked the rear view mirror and out the side windows? So we can back out . . . and then into Drive."

"How does the device know where it is?"

"You mean the geographical location? It has built-in basic area maps, but it also keeps track of where it's been, what landmarks it's seen, how far it's gone in what direction, just like people do. Before it was released, our training staff spent weeks taking it around all the major routes in the area."

"I see. So how does Ms. Rickert command it to take her where she wants to go?"

"She just tells it, 'Take me home.' "

"All right. Do that, Ms. Rickert."

"All right, Your Honor."

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"Now she's pushing the voice code command initiator, there on the right arm of the A.V.C.U. We also have a hands-free model that—"

"The court would rather not be confused with marketing options, Mr. Holiman."

"Yes, sir."

"Ms. Rickert, please speak up so we can hear what you say."

"Okay. Avery, take us—"

"Avery, Ms. Rickert?"

"Um, that's his name."

"Mr. Holiman, does the A.V.C.U. require that it be addressed by a particular name?"

"No, Your Honor, although it does require use of some kind of name. The operators can choose whatever name they prefer."

"I see. Proceed however you will, Ms. Rickert. And remember—this exercise will be useless unless it simulates your, er, methods precisely."

"Avery, take us home, but be sure that you avoid that awful rough part of Eastman Street."

"Is it working, Mr. Holiman?"

"Yes, sir. If it doesn't understand a command, it beeps with a particular frequency and flashes a message on the message bar. You can see by the way the grid is sweeping across the faceplate that it's now in standard operating mode."

"It can understand what she means about the condition of Eastman Street?"

"Sure, Your Honor. If it's already driven on that street."

"All right, then . . . It is really quite remarkable, how the device detected that truck backing out almost a block away and slowed down."

"It's a very cautious driver, sir."

"Most gratifying. But why did it continue through that light? It was changing."

"It records the duration of every stoplight it encounters, so it knows how much time is available for safe transit through the intersection. With a special algorithm that incorporates the speed of the vehicle, the proximity of other vehicles, especially behind and approaching the intersection from the sides, and the duration of the light, it is very accurate in determining the safest decision for passing through the light."

"I see. Ms. Rickert, what are you doing?"

"Checking my mascara, Your Honor."

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"But the A.V.C.U. cannot use the mirror if you turn it at the wrong angle like that. What is that sound, Mr. Holiman?"

"That's a warning that the mirror has been moved to an angle that prevents its use."

"What will happen?"

"If she doesn't return the mirror to the proper position within five seconds, the A.V.C.U. will find a safe place to pull over and stop."

"Very good, indeed. Really, Ms. Rickert—please cooperate."

"Sorry, Your Honor."

"How far is it to your residence, Ms. Rickert?"

"Only a few blocks more. I live pretty close to the courthouse."

"A convenience you no doubt planned when you moved in."

"Yes, sir. I mean, not really, Your Honor."

"Mr. Holiman, why is the car suddenly slowing down?"

"I'm . . . not sure, Your Honor."

"Ms. Rickert, did you do anything to cause the car to slow?"

"No—except Avery knows I like to look in that storefront when we go by."

"Which—that women's apparel store?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Did you see that black gown with the sequins? It would look stunning with—"

"No, Ms. Rickert, I didn't see it. Mr. Holiman, please explain. Is it possible the A.V.C.U. would actually slow down to permit window shopping?"

"Er, well, sure, as long as it doesn't endanger anyone, or violate the law."

"But window shopping from a moving vehicle isn't safe."

"Well, for a driver it isn't—but Ms. Rickert's just a passenger, and it doesn't really hurt anything, does it?"

"You're saying the A.V.C.U. learns the tastes of its passenger and alters its performance accordingly?"

"As much as it can, within its design constraints."

"Something about this gives me a very bad feeling, Mr. Holiman. Why are we stopping?"

"This is my place, Your Honor. Upstairs, where the kitty is sitting in the window."

"Charming, Ms. Rickert. Now, on the day in question, where were you parked?"

"Right here. Avery knows not to park ahead of this because the birds in that tree always poop on my car, and it looks terrible on the pink—"

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"Elaboration is not necessary. Which way did you proceed when you left?"

"Straight ahead. We were on our way to Mrs. Maglash's in Altouna."

"Give the command exactly as you did that day."

"Um, okay. Avery, take us to Mrs. Maglash's in Altouna, and you'd better hurry because she'll be really mad if I don't get this wig to her before she leaves on her trip, and then she'll start buying from that smart-ass Nancy Beel, and I'll lose my commission rating and couldn't stand it if Nancy beats me out this year."

"Ms. Rickert, was all of that entirely necessary?"

"Well, I wanted to explain, and I sort of like talking to—"

"The court has noticed a pattern indicating that. And then what happened?"

"We went up to Oxman Street and turned left because Avery knows I hate waiting for the light at VanArken, so he takes us around so we can make a right on red at Easely Avenue."

"Very well. Did you give Avery—the A.V.C.U.—any other commands during this time?"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, I might have talked about a few things—"

"But no commands."

"No, Your Honor."

"Mr. Holiman, wasn't that stop at the sign a bit abrupt?"

"Well—maybe, but I guess because she told it she was in a hurry—"

"You mean the device is capable of hurrying?"

"It, uh, recognizes several different modes of driving. You know, a relaxed drive with time to look at the scenery, or the most efficient possible route and drive time, for everyday trips; or crisis mode, in which all possible delays are to be avoided."

"So that rapid stop and start were evidence that we are operating in crisis mode."

"Yeah—yes, Your Honor, I think so."

"Then I surmise we are successfully re-creating the events of that day, since Ms. Rickert no doubt functions in crisis mode much of the time. Would you agree, Ms. Rickert?"

"I guess so, Your Honor. Anyway, we were hurrying."

"Then what?"

"Then we turned onto Easely Avenue and headed for the freeway."

"And I believe it was on Easely Avenue that you were observed

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by a police officer to be in violation of the speed limit."

"Yes, sir. A block from here."

"Then we'll wait. . . . Are we there yet, Ms. Rickert?"

"Yes, sir, we just passed the spot."

"Our speed is—excuse me, Mrs. Dabney, I just need to lean forward—our speed is twenty-five miles per hour precisely. What happened, Mr. Holiman?"

"I don't know, sir. All I can figure is, she hasn't told us something that happened that day."

"Ms. Rickert, command the A.V.C.U. to go around the block and approach the area again."

"Okay, Your Honor. Avery, turn right up here and go around the block."

"Now, Ms. Rickert, think: what else might have happened that day? More important, what did *you* do that day? Be certain you are completely honest. Clearly you did something that caused the device to malfunction—"

"But I didn't!"

"—so think of everything, no matter how inconsequential."

"I'm trying really hard, Your Honor . . . Avery, be careful of that puddle."

"Now, Ms. Rickert, before we turn onto Easely Avenue again, can you think of anything else that happened that day?"

"No-o-o. No, I—well, wait, I think I remember somebody opening their car door in front of us and making Avery slam on the brakes."

"Very good, Ms. Rickert. Command Avery to pull over here."

"Here? Okay, Your Honor."

"Mr. Holiman, would you be so kind as to find someone with a car parked along Easely Avenue there, and to ask them to open their door into the street as we approach?"

"Uh—well, okay, Your Honor."

"Please do so as quickly as possible. I believe the circulation in my legs has stopped. . . . That was commendably speedy, Mr. Holiman. May I ask why you are rather red in the face?"

"Nothing, sir . . . could you squeeze over just a little more, Your Honor? . . . just had a little trouble convincing the guy I wasn't trying to make trouble."

"The court appreciates your sacrifice, Mr. Holiman. Ms. Rickert, command Avery to proceed onto Easely Avenue."

"Yes, sir. Avery, get on Easely Avenue again."

"Is that the fellow whose help you enlisted, Mr. Holiman?"

"Yeah, that's—jeeze!"

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"The device 'slams on the brakes' most effectively. Are you all right, Mrs. Dabney?"

"I—I think so, sir."

"Ms. Rickert, what happened next?"

"I think I yelled something at the guy."

"Such as . . . "

"Must I, Your Honor?"

"Authenticity is to everyone's benefit, Ms. Rickert."

"Yes, sir. Um, I said this—"

"Er, thank you, Ms. Rickert. What happened then?"

"He did just what this guy's going—he, um, flipped the bird at me and started his car and pulled out in front of us with the tires squealing."

"And then—"

"I can't remember."

"Surely you can."

"I—"

"It is possible to perjure oneself by omission, Ms. Rickert."

"Uh—and then I said, 'Avery, I'll just die if we let him get away with that! Catch up so I can let him have a piece of my mind.' "

"Good Lord, Holiman, what's happening?"

"I think we've re-created the events accurately, Your Honor."

"The speed is—thirty-six—forty-two—fifty—"

"Oh, no—Avery, be careful of that lady!"

"The Court insists—"

"Avery, no!"

"Mrs. Dabney, are you all right? Mrs. Dabney? Mr. Holiman?"

"Yes, sir. What . . . happened?"

"I believe we're upside-down. Ms. Rickert?"

"Oh-h-h, this is terrible . . . "

"Ms. Rickert, are you all right?"

"My poor car . . . "

"Mrs. Dabney?"

"Oh my, oh my, oh my . . . "

"Did anyone see if the pedestrian escaped unharmed?"

"She did, sir. We swerved just in time."

"Mrs. Dabney, are you well? And is your machine functioning?"

"Oh my, I just—I think so, Your Honor."

"So, then. Mr. Holiman. While we're trying to get out of here, can you explain what happened?"

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"It must have been the way Ms. Rickert said it, Your Honor."

"The way Ms. Rickert said what?"

"What she said when the guy flipped her. I think she phrased it, 'I'll just die if we let him get away with it.' "

"And the A.V.C.U. is so sensitive to her needs that it took that literally, did it, Mr. Holiman?"

"Yes, sir, I think so. It must have thought her life was in danger. I suppose it's something we didn't take into account. A design flaw."

"A design flaw indeed."

"I guess it's time to get back to the drawing board, Your Honor."

"Perhaps it is. But I hope you have other devices with which you and Driver-drone can experiment, since this one may not be available for some time."

"Er . . . why is that, Your Honor?"

"Because Avery has proved itself to be capable of making its own decisions, based on its own logic and reasoning. It has independently and flagrantly violated the law despite its knowledge of that law—"

"But—"

"—not just once but at least twice. In so doing it has caused a potentially fatal accident. For a human, that would be sufficient cause for arrest and prosecution—"

"But—"

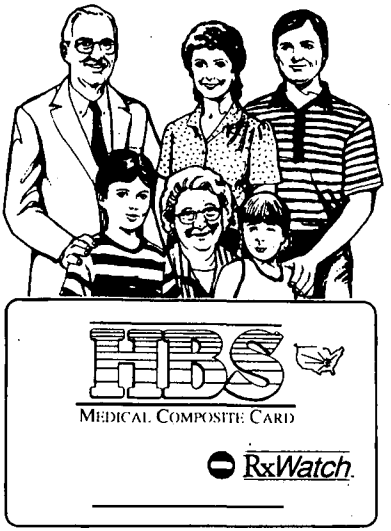
"—and since the device has been accorded the privileges and responsibilities of a human driver, so it shall be accorded the penalties."

"But, Your Honor—"

"It looks like the police are arriving, so we should be out of here soon. Ms. Rickert, the court is also suspending your license for ninety days. Although we cannot prove you made it possible for the A.V.C.U. to break the law, we cannot rely on the A.V.C.U. to protect us and you from yourself. As for you, Mr. Holiman, and Mrs. Dabney, the court thanks you for your help and personal sacrifices in the course of this . . . investigation. It has been a most enlightening experience.

"Court is adjourned."

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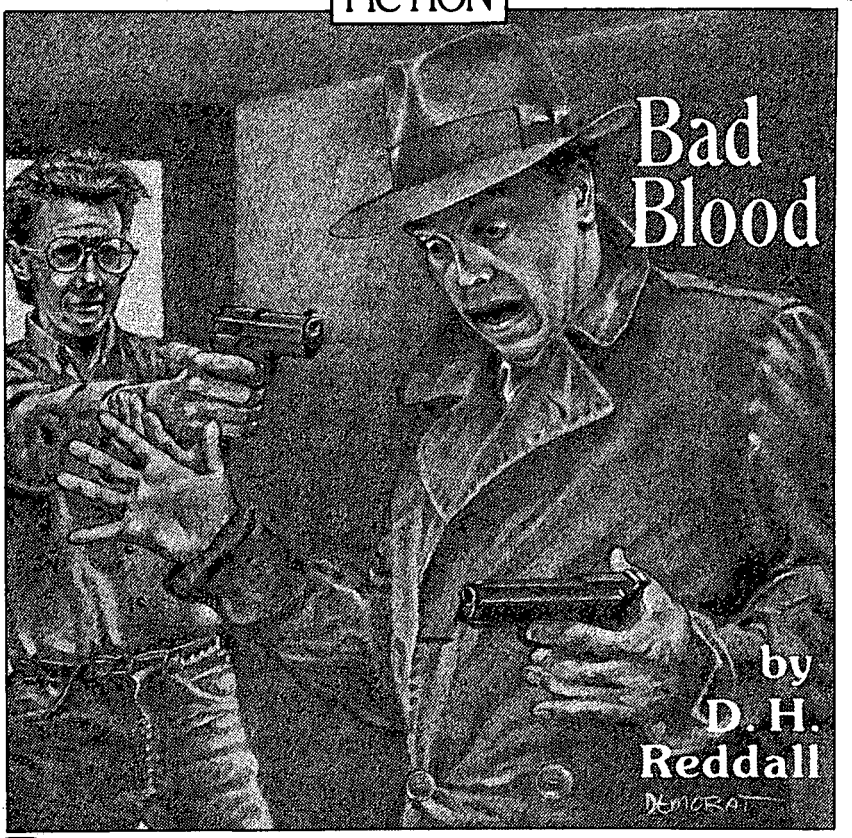
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It was warm for April. I threw open the window, and a gusty breeze blew papers all over the floor. I let them lie there. It was an improvement over the carpet.

There was a faded pack of Bicycles in the drawer, and for a while I practiced my one-hand cut. Below in the music store Emil was taking his trumpet student through "I Should Care." I wondered how Emil could stand it week after week. The kid sounded as if he was playing with a mouthful of soda crackers.

Traffic hummed by. The breeze carried faint sounds of industry from Beale's boatyard. For a while, time drifted.

She came in with a clatter of high heels and the odor of perfume, an attractive, dark-

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haired, compactly-built woman in her late twenties.

"You Mr. Stubblefield?" she asked around a wad of chewing gum. She walked to the other chair with twice as much motion as was needed for the job.

"I'd like to retain your services." She whacked the gum and looked around the office with obvious distaste. "You really ought to hire a cleaning service."

"Name?"

"Huh?"

"Your name."

"Oh. Rita Martinez. I want you to check up on my fiancé. You know, sort of a background check."

"A background check."

"Yeah, like I want to be sure he is what he says he is. I wouldn't want to marry a guy who has a wife stashed somewhere, or who maybe hangs out in gay bars."

"Don't you talk to each other?"

She blinked. "Sure we talk. We talk all the time. But a girl's got to be careful these days. You know: you trust your mother, but you cut the cards." She snapped the gum. "I've read where lots of girls are doing this before they get married. And some of them get some nasty surprises, too." She gave up on the gum, wrapped it in a Kleenex, and deposited it daintily in the ashtray.

"I'm not asking you to look through keyholes. Just check things out, like who he sees and where he goes and anything else you can find out about him that might be important. I mean, if he's at the track every day, I should know that, don't you think?"

It's not my favorite kind of job, but then my Toyota was getting cranky, and there was a broken molar that needed a cap. I knew the contents of my checking account to the penny. A number that small is easy to remember.

"What does your boyfriend do?"

"Rudy's got an interest in a garage. He's crazy about cars, been working on them since he was a kid." She slid some papers across the desk. "Here's his name and address and a photo. You'll do it, huh?"

I nodded, and she reached for her purse, giving me a wide bright smile without a bad tooth in it.

Oceanside Automotive was out on Iyanough Road next to a consulting firm. I parked across the street in the lot of a doughnut joint and waited, sipping coffee and wondering exactly what it is that consultants do. "Consultant" is one of those flabby words, like coordinator or facilitator, that

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conveys virtually no meaning to me. I was certain, though, that if my gas station put up a sign announcing the presence of an automotive consultant or a tire maintenance facilitator, I'd get my gas somewhere else.

Rudy Snepter left the garage a little before noon. He was easy to spot: lots of wavy black hair and a heavyweight's chin balanced incongruously above his skinny frame. There wasn't enough meat on Snepter to make a sick man a sandwich. He climbed into an immaculate '67 Mustang convertible and headed for downtown.

Ten minutes later he doubleparked on Main and went into the Rudder. That explained his emaciation. He was out in a couple of minutes carrying his lunch. I followed him to the docks where he read the paper and ate his sandwich at one of the picnic tables in the park. By one he was back at the garage, where he stayed until five.

The evening was equally uneventful. Snepter drove to the Bayberry Condominiums, Rita Martinez's residence. At midnight I gave it up and went home.

After three days of watching Snepter come and go with nothing more exciting to report than an evening of pool at Smiley's, I decided to go through his garbage. I remembered some clown who billed himself as a garbologist claiming that by a careful analysis of a person's trash, he could construct an elaborate profile of the subject's lifestyle.

After sifting Snepter's garbage I could state with certainty that he had no pets, subscribed to *Playboy* (and saved the centerfolds), and liked coffee ice cream. Obviously, my study would have to be extended for several weeks in order to be profitable. I washed my hands, ate some breakfast, and drove out to Iyanough Road.

An hour later I was walking back to the car with some coffee when I was intercepted by Mutt and Jeff. They looked like extras from *The Godfather:* dark blue suits, black overcoats and hats, dark glasses. The old guy flashed a smile and then it was gone: a knifethrust of a smile.

"The food here must be good." He nodded at the doughnut shop. "You've been spending quite a bit of time here lately." He took off the cheaters and stared at me. I looked at the big guy with him. He looked back.

I said, "You know how it is. You get tired of bean sprouts and tofu all the time."

The little man nodded. "Just so, Mr. Stubblefield, but I fear you are being less than forth-

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right with me. Perhaps you would like to tell me why you have spent the last three days here observing the garage, and on whose behalf."

"No, really. Health food is okay for awhile, but sometimes, don't you know, you get a craving for grease."

The big man took a step forward. "Let me bust him, Mr. Gargan."

The old man barred his way with a thin arm. "Not just yet, Leo." Another razor-quick smile. "Very careless of you, parking in the same place in the same car every day. Strictly bush league." He stared at me the way an entomologist might inspect a beetle. "What do you think you're doing?"

"That's a rhetorical question, Gargan. You know what I'm doing, or you wouldn't be here with the muscle. Question is, why is a sclerotic numbers runner interested?"

Leo pushed forward again. "C'mon, Mr. Gargan. Let's hear this peeper's bones snap."

Gargan shook his head. "You're out of order, Stubblefield. I object to your intrusions. They must cease, or else I will be forced to discuss the matter with you further."

"Stop it," I said. "You're scaring me to death."

Gargan shrugged. "You've been told." He led Leo away, and I watched as they boarded a midnight blue Caddy and slid into the flow of traffic, sharks among unsuspecting fish.

There was no use in continuing to watch the garage. That was okay. I'd about reached my limit for sour coffee and jelly doughnuts anyway. Besides, the case had taken on a new complexion with the presence of Gargan. I wanted an update on the man.

Glen Hough was a reporter and columnist for the *Cape and Islands Ledger,* and the closest thing the area had to a gossip columnist. I found him at his desk and asked about Gargan.

"Ah, Stanley Gargan. You're looking under some large rocks, Charles."

"Last I knew Gargan was small time: numbers, some fencing, that kind of thing."

"Mr. Gargan has diversified. Word is that he now deals in automobiles. He takes orders for specific models, you understand, and his staff procures them. The cars are a sideline, of course. Pocket money. Gargan's real business is in narcotics."

"A busy little man."

"And slippery. He's only been inside once to my knowledge, a tribute to his accountants and lawyers. Leo, by the way, is Leo Barbosa. He's bad news: ex-

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light heavyweight, a contender once, I believe. Beat a man to death outside a barroom in New Bedford a few years ago, did time, found a home with Gargan when he got out."

"How about Rudy Snepter?"

"Don't know him. But there's a Tom Snepter who's a bit of a bad boy. I believe he works for Ross Tierney, a.k.a. Ross the Boss. Him you know. Tierney and Gargan have no use for each other, being that they're in the same line of work."

"You should be a P.I."

"I'm a scribbler, Charles. I get to shoot my mouth off twice a week in a small corner of the paper, collect a modest paycheck, and open letters that say things like, "Dear Mr. Hough: Exactly what did you mean by 'slackjawed vacuity'?"

I gave Snepter a night off, took home some Chinese food, and went to bed early. And had the dream.

I'd had the dream off and on since I was a kid. The details vary, but the plot is always the same. I'm being pursued by someone who wants to hurt me. I'm armed, and at the conclusion of the dream, I always draw and fire my gun. And every time, the bullet loops lazily out of the barrel and falls to the ground a few feet in front of me. A friend of mine who's a psychologist tells me that this is a classic symbol of impotence. Maybe. On the other hand, people in that racket tend to see a phallic symbol in anything that is longer than it is wide.

I woke up to an insistent pounding on my door. Shaking off the dream, I worked the lock and opened up to find the Hyannis P.D. in the form of Lieutenant Olivera and Sergeant Romeo.

"Morning, Charles."

"Is it?"

"Well, technically. Can we come in?" I stood aside and they came in and found chairs. Olivera dug out a thin cigar with a plastic tip.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"No, I don't mind if you smoke. I don't mind that you get me out of bed at three thirty in the morning. I welcome any opportunity to work more closely with my colleagues in our constant vigil against the forces of evil."

Romeo said, "Buckle your mouth, Stubblefield, until we tell you to open it."

I turned to Olivera. "Look, we go back a long way, but that doesn't mean you can come in here and roust me with some head-banger who counts on his fingers and moves his lips when he reads." Romeo was on his feet fast, and so was I.

"Ease up, Romeo," said Olivera. "You too, Charles." Romeo sat down but kept a hard

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eye on me. Olivera sat back and worked on the cigar.

"I'd like to hear what you know about one Rudy Snepter."

"Not much. He has something to do with a garage out on Iyanough and he doesn't look strong enough to tear open his mail. Why?"

"That's all? You haven't been following him around lately? Come on, Charles, talk to me."

"I've been following him. What's this about, Eddie?"

"Snepter's dead. He met a rather unpleasant end a few hours ago."

"Real unpleasant," said Romeo. "Somebody poured gasoline down the kid's throat and lit him. Then they put a bullet in his brain, just to be sure."

"Jesus Christ."

"We got a call," said Olivera. "Anonymous, of course. Said he'd seen someone tailing Snepter for a few days. Gave us a plate number."

"Surprise!" said Romeo. "It's yours."

Olivera considered his cigar. "You home all night?"

"That's right."

"Can you prove that?" said Romeo.

"Do I have to?"

"Not yet," said Olivera. "Who asked you to keep a diary on Snepter?"

I didn't say anything. Romeo was on his feet again. "Come on, you shmegegge. This is a murder investigation, and you got no rights of confidentiality. Open up, or we'll take away your junior G-man badge and slam you so far back in the can they'll have to pump air back to you."

I said, "Eddie, get this lame out of here. I've got no more to say."

"Wait in the car, Francis."

"He's holding out on us."

"Do it now."

Romeo stomped out, slamming the door.

"He's a hothead, but he's okay."

"Sure," I said. "He's a swell guy. If it was raining soup he'd hand you a fork."

Olivera got up and walked to the door. "We think Snepter was tangled up somehow with Stanley Gargan. Gargan's slime, but this doesn't seem like his style." He chewed on the cigar. "You talk to Snepter?"

"No."

He nodded. "Be available, Charles. I'll want to talk to you again." He left, trailing smoke and suspicion. At least he didn't slam the door.

Rita Martinez walked into the office at noon. She had been crying, but that was over for now. She sat quietly for a minute or two and then spoke.

"Who could do such a thing?

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And why? Rudy was a nice boy."

There are words that are supposed to comfort people at times like this, but I can't bring myself to say them. They seem hollow and inconsequential things to send against the enormity of death.

I said, "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right! How could I be all right?" She calmed herself with an effort. "Rudy wasn't rich, or successful. He wasn't well-educated. But he was good. You go out with enough men, you discover that most of them are creeps in one way or another. Rudy was different. He was gentle and he treated me good, not like some piece of meat he picked up in a singles bar. I want you to find out who did this."

"Do you know a man named Gargan?" She shook her head.

"Did Rudy talk about his work?"

"No. That was his business, and anyway, cars bore me. We didn't talk shop when we were together. But Rudy was a hard worker. All he wanted was to get ahead in life, make enough money so we could get married, buy a house someday. Is that a reason to kill somebody?"

There was nothing I could say to that. I agreed to try and find Rudy's killer and saw her on her way. Then I drove out to Oceanside Automotive.

On a street lined with hideous buildings, Oceanside Automotive was a standout: a bridlepath-tan corrugated box parked on an acre of asphalt and ringed with chain-link. Pride in workmanship was evident everywhere. I went inside and wandered out back where a very fat man was leaning into the engine compartment of a Firebird.

"Well, well. Bobby Welsh. How's the car trade?"

Welsh stood up, all three hundred pounds of him, and glared at me. He had a lot of stringy black hair and a full beard. That and his size made him look ursine and formidable. Until you got to know him. Behind the front there was absolutely nothing. Welsh would trample his mother on his way to the fire exit.

"Whatta you want?"

I looked around for the paint room. Welsh was nicknamed "Lamb" from the days when he ran a chop shop. A few years back I had been working on something else, and it had slopped over onto Welsh's operation and he'd been busted. It appeared that he hadn't forgiven me yet.

"A little information."

"I got nothin' to say to you. Take a hike."

I walked over to him slowly and deliberately, until I was about a foot away.

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"I don't have time for your crap today, Lambchop, so listen up. I want the answers to a couple of questions. If I get them, I'm gone. If not, I'll wave so many cops in your face you'll think you're at the academy."

"Cops was here already. I'm clean. And don't call me Lambchop. I don't do that stuff no more."

"Uh-huh. You've moved up in the world. What do you do now, Lamb? Fast repaint on Gargan's special orders?" He didn't like that. His eyes shifted around the room and he wiped his hands nervously on a red rag.

"How did Rudy fit in? Don't tell me: he shuffled the cars, right? Then you painted them and Gargan peddled them." Welsh had started to sweat. "I'm not looking to wax you on this, Bobby, but I'm going to get some answers."

"What do you want?"

"I want to know why Rudy got clipped."

"I don't know why, man."

"He cross Gargan?"

"No, far as I know. How could he? I mean, he shlepped a few cars around is all."

That made sense. I took a look around the shop, checked out the calendar girl who was holding a wrench in a suggestive manner, scanned a newspaper open to an ad for an upcoming appearance by the Smothers Brothers, and turned back to Welsh. "What about Rudy's brother?"

"What about him?"

"Rudy wanted work, why didn't he go to work for Tierney?"

"He did. Once in a while Tom would stop in. Rudy'd get all pumped up, you know. He idolized his brother."

"What did he do for Tierney?"

"He didn't say. Drove, probably. Driving was the only thing Rudy was any good at, besides mechanics. They wouldn't give him nothin' else to do. He wasn't smart enough. Only reason they used him at all, probably, was because of his brother."

"So why did Gargan take him on?"

Welsh shrugged. "Beats me. One day Gargan shows up and tells me I got a partner. Warns me to keep my mouth shut about it. Nobody's supposed to know there's a connection between the kid and Gargan. He treats the kid real good, tells him how valuable he is, how someday he'll be a major player. I never could figure it."

"The way he was killed suggest anything to you?"

"Like what?"

"Burning his throat. A way of saying that people who talk too much aren't going to collect Social Security."

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I left him there rubbing his hands with the rag, his bloated features creased by worry lines.

I drove back to the office, got my feet up, and went through the mail, which included a gift catalogue. I didn't have anyone to buy a present for. Too bad. Here were some really terrific gift ideas: golf tees shaped like teeth for the dentist in your life; a miniature rake for combing one's mustache; and edible stationery. I was trying to figure out who would want to eat their mail when Olivera walked in.

"You forgot your attack dog."

"Charles, Charles. I'm just trying to bring a little color into your otherwise barren existence." He looked around. "I didn't think there was another office anywhere as homely as mine. Just goes to show." He sat and found a cigar.

"Had a nice little chat with Stanley Gargan. Such a refined gentleman. I could never for a moment believe that a man who dresses so tastefully and uses so many five dollar words could be involved in illegal activities." He fired the cigar. "Gargan reminds me of something I read once; that if you took all the electrical current generated by fifty thousand human brains, you might be able to light up a very small light bulb."

He worked over the plastic cigartip for a minute.

"Thing is, Gargan's dirty. He peddles drugs, he steals cars, he runs numbers, and one of these days we're going to cuff him." He fixed me with his flat-black eyes. "Also talked to Ms. Martinez. She explained why you were following Snepter. What a way to make a living."

I let that slide and said, "Gargan called in my license plate to you. A little obvious."

"He's worried. We're aware of Leo Barbosa, and Gargan knows it. Restraint is not one of Leo's virtues. Maybe he burned Snepter."

"Maybe. They warned me off."

"When?"

"The morning before Snepter bought it."

"Nice of you to let us know." He got up and made for the door. "We'll get what we need, soon as we tighten the screws on that fatboy, Welsh. He's about as tough as a sneaker full of pasta. If I was Gargan, I'd be worried."

"Why?"

"If Tom Snepter gets the notion that Gargan rubbed his brother, he'll go gunning for him."

After Olivera left, I sat for awhile, turning Snepter's killing over in my head and deciding what to do next. Leo Bar-

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bosa stepped into the office and made the decision for me.

"Get your shoes on, crapbrain. Gargan wants you."

"Come on, Leo, let's hear you ask nicely."

"Your lucky day, Stubblefield. Gargan says no rough stuff. But if you want to argue about it, I'll be happy to stuff you."

"Right, Leo. And who'll carry your hat home?"

"Enough talk," he snarled, coming up with an automatic in his gloved hand. The working end of a gun looks huge, but I'd seen them before.

"Put it away. I was going to see the great man anyway." I brushed by Leo and let him catch up to me on the street.

Gargan worked out of the Mutual Building, a decrepit pile of bricks by the rail spur where he operated a collection agency. Leo walked us past a watchful pair of thyroid cases to an office. Gargan sat at a desk, a pair of revolvers in front of him.

"Is there anyone working for you," I asked, "whose parents aren't siblings?"

"This isn't the time for comedy, Stubblefield. My life is in danger."

"So what?"

"I didn't do Rudy. You've got to believe that."

"Why?"

"I couldn't do something like that. Gasoline—"

"Leo wouldn't mind. It wouldn't mean any more to him than toasting a marshmallow."

"No. Not Leo, not me."

"What did Rudy do for you?"

"Errands. Just a few little things."

"A few little things," I said. "A Caddy here, a Bimmer there, the occasional Camaro."

"Yes, yes, but I had no reason to kill the boy."

"Then who did?"

Gargan fidgeted with the guns. "I really couldn't say. I took no interest in Rudy's personal life."

"You called me over here for what, then?"

"I want you to see Tom Snepter, explain that I'm not responsible for Rudy's death. Tom's wild. He'll go to great lengths to harm me if he thinks I was somehow involved. You will, of course, be well paid for your trouble."

"The hell with that," I said. "You fogged Rudy, or you had it done. Maybe he crossed you up. Maybe you got nervous when you found out I was tailing him, figured he had become a liability. Maybe Leo needed some exercise. I don't know. But you look good for it."

"No!" Gargan slapped the desk with his palm and was suddenly racked with a

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coughing fit. When he recovered, he turned to Leo.

"I'd like to talk to Stubblefield alone for a few minutes." Leo gave me a meaningful look and left the room. Gargan looked bad. His face was ashen, and his hands were trembling as he idly rearranged the guns on his desk.

"That's a nasty cough. You should see a doctor."

"I have. He says I have anywhere from one to five years left. About as helpful as a long-range weather forecast. I'm seventy years old, for crissake."

"About Snepter."

"Rudy had another function. Tierney used him from time to time as a delivery boy, a courier. Tierney and I are competitors in an area where there isn't much room for competition. I set Rudy up in business, quietly, of course, and in return he provided me with certain information about Tierney's operations."

"You've been hijacking Tierney. And he found out where the leak was."

Gargan shrugged. "Rudy was a nice boy, but stupid. He probably went about his prying in too obvious a manner, and Tierney put two and two together."

"You're a sweet guy, Stanley. You sent a simpleton into the lion's den. Now he's dead, and all it is to you is an inconvenience."

"Don't preach at me, Stubblefield. I have no time for Bible bangers or Brownies. Snepter wanted to get ahead. I gave him the opportunity to do so. He blew it. End of story."

I got up.

"Where are you going?"

"Someplace where the air is clean. And then I'll probably fumigate my clothes." Leo appeared, filling the doorway.

"You'll talk to Snepter?"

"If I do, it won't be on your account. And tell Leo to disappear again, or he'll be wearing his guts for garters."

Gargan waved Leo off, and I went out of there, leaving a sick old man to whatever solace his two revolvers could provide.

Ross "The Boss" Tierney was working a twofer: by killing Rudy, he had rid himself of a traitor; by pointing at Gargan and unleashing Rudy's brother he hoped to rid himself of his competition. Neat, unless the older Snepter learned the truth. I didn't know if he'd buy it, but I had to try.

Tierney's "office" was the Cardinal Club, a brick-front restaurant and social club not far from the airport. I couldn't very well walk in the front door and present my card, so I wasted some time making calls and chasing down contacts in an attempt to find out where I

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could catch Snepter. Finally I called Rita Martinez, which I should have done in the first place. She told me that Snepter rented a house in Marstons Mills with his girlfriend and their infant daughter.

Half an hour later I parked the car in front of Snepter's place and rang the bell. The door opened almost immediately. A tall, very pale redhead looked me over nervously.

"What is it?"

"Is Tom here? I need to talk to him." She nodded and stood aside, and I walked in.

Leo was waiting for me in the hall. The automatic looked just as big as it had before.

"Tommy boy ain't here just yet. You ought to learn to mind your own business, Jack, you wouldn't always be running into my gun." He motioned us both into the living room, took my Browning, and made us sit.

"Stanley wasn't sure you'd be any good, so he sent me over to straighten things out with Snepter. Insurance, you could say."

"Why should Snepter believe it coming from you?"

Leo shrugged. "If he listens to reason, and believes that Tierney capped his brother, okay. If not, that's okay, too. It don't make any difference to me either way. I wasn't counting on you, but hey, no problem. Three people can disappear just as easy as two. It's a big ocean."

"You can't do that," the girl said. "We haven't done anything to you, or to Mr. Gargan. I've got a baby! What about my baby?" She was wailing now and Leo turned on her.

"Shuddup with that noise!" But she was hysterical and on her feet, momentarily getting Leo's attention. I took the chance and it might have worked, except that Leo was faster than I had anticipated. I had gotten within striking distance when he sensed me. He whirled around and slapped the side of my jaw with the gun. I went down, and Leo stood over me.

"What's the matter, Jack? No wisecracks now?" He pointed the gun at my head and the room was filled with thunder.

Leo jerked a little and stood there with a look of surprise on his face. Then slowly he looked down at his chest where blood was already soaking his shirt. He looked up, disbelieving, as the second shot punched him back into the corner. He slid to the floor slowly, the expression of incredulity still in place as he died.

Snepter stood in the doorway and pointed a .38 at my belt.

"No, Tom!" the girl cried. "Don't shoot him!"

"Speak up, mister. Who are you?"

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"Stubblefield. I'm a private cop. Put that thing away."

A tight smile cracked his thin face. "The one with the gun gives the orders, pal. That's me. What're you doing here?"

"Gargan didn't kill your brother. Rudy was selling out Tierney, and Tierney found out."

Snepter's face darkened. "That's a load of crap. Rudy was my brother, goddamnit. Don't tell me something like that and expect to walk away."

"He was working for Gargan. Who do you think set him up at the garage?"

"That's not enough. Rudy was a good mechanic. Why wouldn't Welsh hire him?"

"Welsh, hell. Gargan owns that operation top to bottom. He took Rudy on and used him to get information about Tierney, but he didn't kill him. Tierney did."

Snepter chewed on that for a minute.

"Think," I said. "Has Tierney been held up lately, lost some product?"

Snepter nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, he has."

"Rudy wanted to prove himself. Tierney wouldn't give him the chance, so he went to work for Gargan, despite the fact that he idolized you." I stopped talking. My head hurt like hell, and I could see Snepter considering what I'd told him. He pulled out a second gun, a Banker's Special.

"Take this," he said to the girl. She hesitated.

"Take it! If he moves, pull the trigger and keep on pulling it." He handed her the gun and strode quickly to where Leo sat.

"We'll put this garbage in the cellar for the time being." He tilted Leo onto the floor, deftly rolled the body up in the rug, and dragged it toward the kitchen.

The redhead and I looked at each other while Leo's body thumped, one step at a time, down the cellar stairs. With each thump, the girl winced.

Snepter reappeared and headed for the front door.

"Leave it alone, Snepter," I said. "Let the cops clean it up." He paused, put on his hat, and adjusted it carefully.

"I think I'll have a word with Ross. Just because you say so doesn't mean that's the way it is." He shrugged on a coat. "But if you're right—" He turned to the girl.

"Keep him here, Tracy. If he gets out of the chair, shoot him in the foot. You won't have to do anything after that."

Tracy sat pointing the gun at me and biting her thumbnail. Every time I moved, the gun jerked nervously. Finally I said, "You know there's only

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one way this can turn out." She looked ready to cry.

"Tierney's a dangerous man, and he's got a lot of help. Tom doesn't stand a chance." She didn't say anything.

"And even if he somehow manages to get Tierney, the law is going to grind him up and lock what's left of him away until he's old. Do you want that?" She shook her head.

"Then let me go after him. Maybe I can stop him."

She began to cry. "How? You don't know Tom. He's so angry over Rudy. Nothing can stop him."

"Let me try, Tracy."

Sobbing, she lowered the gun. I went over to her.

"I'll do what I can, I promise you." She didn't seem to hear me. I pocketed the little .38 and went out of there.

By running a couple of red lights I made it to the Cardinal Club in a little under half an hour. As soon as I turned the corner I knew I was too late.

Squad cars and ambulances blocked the road, and cops were turning away the rubbernecks. I spotted Olivera talking to the M.E. and went over.

"Snepter?"

"How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

He gave me a steely look. "Snepter's dead. So are two of Tierney's minders." The medics pulled somebody out on a stretcher and stuffed him into the back of an ambulance.

"What about Tierney?"

"He took one in the chest, but he'll survive. Too bad." The medics were bringing out another stretcher. Olivera spat and tugged at the brim of his hat.

"Christ. You might as well be living in a war zone."

I drove out to the beach and sat in the sand for awhile. And I thought: I thought about what Olivera had said; about a society where grade school kids settle arguments with semi-automatic weapons; about the meaningless reasons people find to kill each other; about Tracy and her baby; about what I was going to say to Rita Martinez.

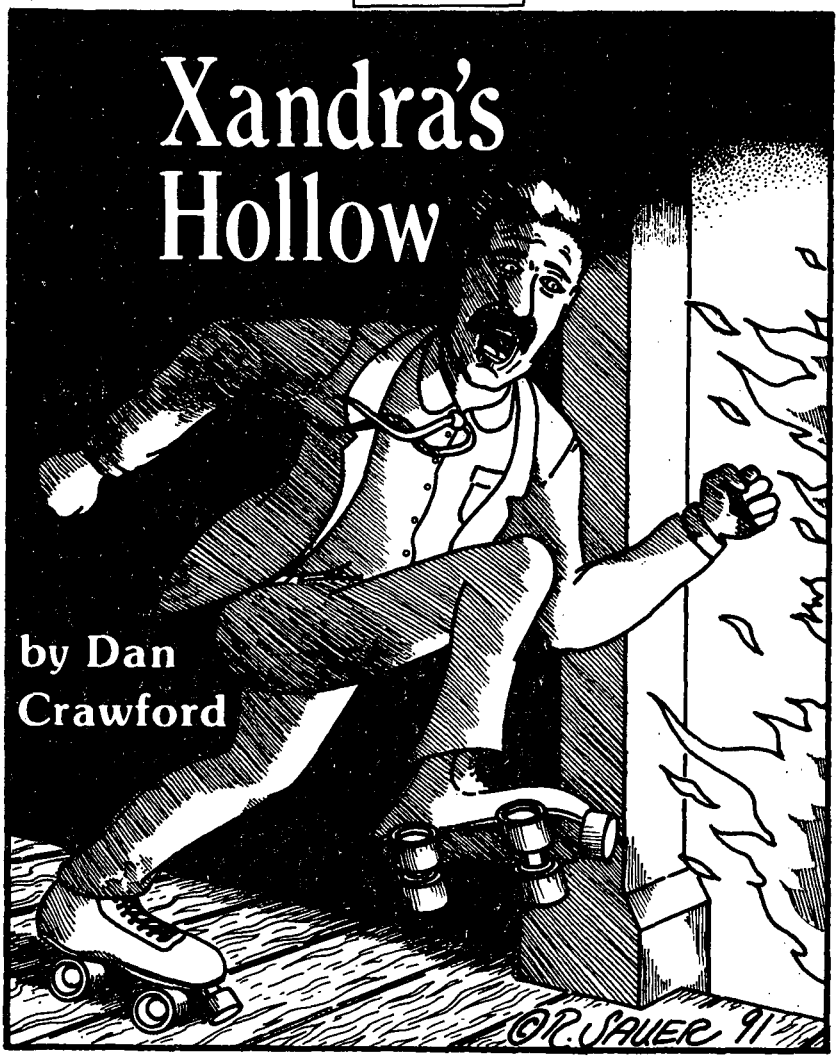
The sun sparkled off the long Atlantic rollers. Above them, the gannets were wheeling and diving for their food, birds whose entire lives are spent mostly at sea, their wings stiffened by the clean salt air.

After a while I walked back to the car and drove home.

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Xandra's Hollow

by Dan Crawford



Her cool "Good afternoon, sir" gave no sign of a mad yearning to converse with a journalist of radiant personal beauty. Still, looks may deceive, so I pursued the conversation to the extent of "I hope it isn't going to rain."

Illustration by Richard Sauer

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She glanced at the grey clouds above, the wooden planking below, and then down the street to the great brown building that towered over the town. "One hopes not," she said, and trotted on. Looks were not deceiving at all in this case.

Two storefronts down, a man who had been lurking in his doorway watching ever since she turned the corner now stepped forward. "Good afternoon, Miss Boyd. I do hope it isn't going to rain."

He said nothing I hadn't expressed, and better, but her face took on an animation it had not had while pointed at me. "No, one hopes not," she replied. She even favored him with a hint of a smile and showed a faint inclination to linger. Well, there's no disputing about tastes. Perhaps, like so many people, the schoolmistress was overawed by the power of the press.

Turning to go, I found the Widow Lawrence, who is awed by nothing and no one, stepping along the new sidewalk, her eyes on the air. "Oh, it's you, sir," she said on discovering my presence. She set a soft hand on my nearest wrist. "I do hope it isn't going to rain."

I tried to disengage the hand and discuss the weather. She was fortunately distracted by the sight of another young man stepping up to the schoolmistress to inquire about the chances of precipitation. The young haberdasher glowered at the interruption.

The inhabitants of Xandra's Hollow had rain on the brain today. Spring was as uncertain as ever, and the brand new sidewalk, purchased at great expense to the city, had been unrolled in defiance of conservatives who warned that it would not be safe until at least mid-May. The first thaw, now refrozen, had produced only minor mud, but the pessimists on the town council predicted that these smooth, unwarped boards would be turned into barrel staves when spring really got under way. The first good rain would prove them right, they said, though of course they piously hoped they were wrong.

More frivolous minds were aware that bad weather would cut down the festivities at the opening of the Xandra's Hollow Roller-Skating Emporium, that great barnesque building at the end of the street. The mad craze that had swept the Union had reached these western districts at last and had caught on well, which may surprise those of you from the East who think that we out here ride nothing wilder than the occasional buffalo.

Miss Boyd was, of course, a

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woman whose opinion about the rain mattered considerably. You could tell this from the number of people in store doorways, pretending to be studying the clouds but in actuality listening to the schoolmistress's conversation with the two young men.

Any schoolmistress who works in a town the size of Xandra's Hollow must, of course, become accustomed to having her business minded for her by the populace. Bets were being offered as to whether and when Miss Boyd intended a change of last name, and whether she would favor Joe Cooper, the owner and sole proprietor of Cooper's Men's Clothing, or "Red" (actually Mordecai) Gamble, a rural gentleman whose natural good looks were accompanied by a certain aroma of livestock.

Town opinion was sharply divided. Urban souls like the barber felt Miss Boyd would be mad to throw herself away on a cowboy; less citified folk like Mrs. Cole were sure that a well set up woman like Miss Boyd would be wasted in the cramped confines of town life. Odds were also available on whether it would come down to a fight in the end. Indeed, if looks could kill, I could see that both her suitors would be stretched dead at her feet. And she might have cared.

For Miss Boyd was trained in diplomacy. To the disappointment of all the town, she bestowed the same smile on the entrepreneur that she did the cowman. Shaking her head to any suggestion of inclement weather, she marched on her way alone. Her dignity was more than queenly; only a schoolteacher could have carried it off. At sixteen, she had already mastered the quelling glance over the eyeglasses; I have never seen even an editor look meaner. Schoolmistress she was: unquestioned empress in her domain. On occasions when I visited the schoolhouse, I found her strenuously engaged in the task of making her students smart, at one end or the other. Anyone who could not produce the alphabet or a list of presidents and dates on request could not graduate. Or sit down much.

As she strode toward the new skating rink, Miss Boyd's feet rang against the new sidewalk as if to show us all how firm was the wood and how wise the mayor to have had it laid down. At least it was taken in that spirit by the Widow Lawrence, who sniffed, "She would take that tone."

"You can't blame her for favoring the current administration," I replied. She sniffed again. We strolled toward the new building ourselves. A large

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crowd was already there, gathered around a platform that had been built in front of it. Miss Boyd was making her way to the platform, nodding to her various well-wishers and the parents of her subjects.

Most parents congratulated the mayor on finding such a perfect schoolmistress, and one, moreover, whose room and board were no burden on the community chest. Mayor Boyd took these compliments as he took everything: with gusto. So far, however, he had resisted all suggestions that he issue his daughter a lifetime contract. Miss Boyd had one not uncommon flaw—a yearning for the exotic. Her schoolroom was decorated with cultural flotsam from faroff lands: maps, prints of distant cities, a stuffed alligator (what classroom can be complete without a stuffed alligator?), a globe, replicas of the clocks and lamps of the ancients, Arabian slippers, and so forth.

Her interest in the bizarre had even led her to associate with me for a time, when I first arrived in Xandra's Hollow and let word escape that I had lived for many years in New York. Her visits to the newspaper office had ceased after she divined that I was wintering in Xandra's Hollow because I lacked the wherewithal to go back to New York.

The Widow Lawrence watched intently as the schoolmistress marched up the steps to the platform. She sniffed again. Her son, who had been whipped on numerous occasions (and for just cause, if I knew Master Stephen at all) by Miss Boyd, helped sort mail at the post office and had brought his mother news of all the college catalogues that had been arriving for Miss Boyd from institutions on the East Coast.

"If this town is not good enough for her," she told me, and anyone else within twenty feet, "and a good job isn't good enough for her, well, I just don't know what I can say."

I knew what she could say, however, because she had said it all several times before. "The town council is still badgering the mayor to sign her to a lifetime contract," I pointed out.

A loud sniff gave me to understand that the widow would be displeased whether Miss Boyd stayed or went. She had opened her mouth to expand on that when the mayor rose and called for silence. Her animosity did not extend to the mayor, so she obeyed this request.

"Friends," he said, "you all know why we're here just now, but I'm gonna tell you anyhow 'cause that's my job." A tiny move fluttered the features of Miss Boyd; this is not uncommon in the features of daugh-

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ters whose fathers have elected to make a speech.

He waved at a tall individual on his right. "We're here to officially open Charley Pearce's new roller-skating rink, the best, if only, skating rink in this county, and one that will make Xandra's Hollow the showcase of the state."

He led the applause for Charley Pearce but did not step back to let the rink's proprietor make a speech. The mayor liked to talk, and most of the town was willing to indulge him.

David Boyd was a rough-hewn, square-cut mayor who liked his voters to have a good time and didn't mind their seeing him have a good time. As a result, he was as well-liked as his daughter was respected. Opposition to the skating rink from the Methodist section of town had been silenced as soon as the mayor said he was in favor of the venture.

His robust good will and honesty were part of the reason for his good reputation, even among those Methodists who disapproved of his drinking. The other reason for his repute came from the fact that any of the land for twenty miles around the town that he did not personally own he had sold to people who weren't done paying for it yet. He still owned much of the little valley in which the town had grown up. As mayor, he had presided over its birth and had christened it in honor of his late wife and his daughter, both named Alexandra Boyd. (Miss Boyd was now too august to be called Xandra by anyone but her father and a few old settlers who had elected themselves her honorary uncles.)

So David Boyd could easily have bought and sold anyone in the crowd before the skating rink. And the fact that he did not use his power in such a manner as to be unpleasant about it had won him not only the votes but the affection of his listeners. They were even willing to hear him out as he reminisced about carving a settlement out of the valley twenty years before.

"I can remember," he said, "when this busy metropolis wasn't anything more than a couple of tents down by the crick. And now, when I look around at these fine frame buildings and a skating rink that has no equal this side of the Mississippi, I think . . ."

"Do not surrender to the pleasures of the flesh, oh, brothers!"

We all looked around, mainly to verify the source of the voice rather than identify it. Reverend McCosh and his cronies had set up shop at the rear of

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the crowd. The reverend doctor himself was raising his hands to heaven, having mounted on a barrel first so he wouldn't have quite so far to reach.

The Reverend Doctor Lucius A. McCosh was a freelance clergyman for the True Church of the Truth, a church recently founded by Lucius A. McCosh following the refusal of the Methodist Episcopal Church to give him a license to preach under its auspices. After founding the True Church of the Truth and bestowing upon himself the proper titles, Reverend McCosh had set out to inform us all that our nation was destined to emulate the Fall of Rome, offering as evidence the duplicity and sensual nature of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the election of a Democrat to the White House, and the presence of a skating rink in this community.

"Hell's so full of roller skaters," he screeched, "you can see their feets stickin' through the winders!"

He had his usual congregation standing around the barrel, which stood on a plank across two wooden crates. Postmaster Andersen was there, as were Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and the Grants, good polypragmatic people who raised money for the distant savage and hurried to explain to the next door neighbors how the actions of those neighbors did not perfectly accord with Scripture.

McCosh himself was no polished speaker; his voice was unpleasant, and his message did not clash with that. He had not the face for preaching salvation, and when he mentioned forgiveness, you could tell he had his doubts about it. The True Church of the Truth was not a church to win support. It dragged you in by the tender protuberances of guilt.

Mayor Boyd went on, not raising his voice, yet a new tone in it told us he could have outshouted Dr. McCosh if he so chose. He was merely too broadminded to do so; that was all. Part of his forbearance probably sprang from the observation that no one beyond the usual Truthseekers was paying much attention to the self-revered reverend anyhow.

But Reverend McCosh was not now attending to the mayor's speech. He was embarking on a list of the other buildings in Xandra's Hollow that would benefit by conflagration. The saloons were almost as bad as a rink for sinning roller skaters, he told us, and the schoolhouse was worse.

"That's another building to send the unsuspecting rolling to hell!" he called out. "Once a child can read his Bible, schooling's a snare, a delusion of Satan. Geographics and arithmet-

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ism'll lead only to drink and roller skating! Rum and the rollers!"

Miss Boyd heard that, and a spasm wrinkled her smooth features. Red Gamble and Joe Cooper separated themselves from the crowd on witnessing this. It was an independent desertion, but they noticed each other while crossing the new town square. They paused, each glaring at his rival. But then, with a nod, they stepped over to join the Truthseekers.

The Truthseekers smiled on these converts. So imbued, apparently, with the spirit of the True Church of the Truth were the newcomers that they got right up front so they could hear the message all the better.

"Rolling to Hell, aye, rolling to Hell! That's where they're headin', the drinkers, the liars, the thieves, the roller skaters. The sand shall be washed from under the feets of the drinkers and roller skaters while the righteous stand firm on . . . eeyop!"

At a second nod, Joe and Red had kicked out the two boxes holding up the righteous. Had the ground been softer, or the reverend less nimble, it would have ended there, with a large, damp thud. But Dr. McCosh had always been an upright soul, and he remained so now, landing on the overturned barrel, which wobbled a little under the impact. A kick from Red sent it wobbling out into the town square and right up against the horse trough.

"Drinkin'," said Red, after the splash.

"And rolling, too," noted Joe.

The Truthseekers could not let this go unchallenged, and while the ladies tried to lever the minister out of the water, the men advanced on the forces of wickedness. But the town constables, who had hitherto displayed a certain unconcern about the whole thing, stepped in now to restore peace in the hollow.

The Truthseekers raised a not unjustified complaint. When Joe and Red answered with no more than a grin, the complaint grew louder.

"Only one thing to do, Henry!" called Mayor Boyd, who had interrupted his speech to watch the fracas. "Better disperse the crowd. Come on, folks! Time to go in and eat, if you've a mind to. But I warn ye: we're not gonna let anybody in who don't come!"

The rush for the doors nearly dealt the official platform the same kind of disaster that had visited the one across the square. Hardly anyone spared a glance for the Reverend Doctor McCosh, who sloshed away growling that the visitation of the Lord's wrath would come sooner than we dreamed.

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There was to be an eating establishment on the first floor of the new structure, but this was not quite finished yet. Instead, food and drink were spread for us upstairs, in the rink itself. Planking had been set up on sawhorses all around the perimeter of the rink and chairs pulled up to these makeshift tables. From the center of the rink, we were serenaded by a twenty-piece orchestra (five men who could each play four instruments).

The Widow Lawrence would have chosen a seat for me in a dark corner, but I drew away to chat with a fox-faced soul with curly hair gone white and cheeks lined with a fine network of scorn. He glowered as I approached, but I was used to this and survived with only minor damage.

I had spent the winter acting as assistant editor of the Xandra's Hollow *Xylophone*: this was the editor I was assisting. Our duties were evenly divided, right down the middle. He wrote the lead editorial, checked my spelling, and criticized my grammar. I wrote up the news and the advertisements, set up type, ran the press, delivered the papers, chased after subscribers, chopped the wood, loaded the stove, made the coffee, swept the floor, and filled my spare time making up the weather forecasts. For this I got my room and board and two cigars every other week.

"Don't drink so much you can't get out on the floor," he snarled at me as I pulled up to within earshot. "We don't take excuses. Except that poor excuse for prose you call writing."

I bowed. "I will attempt to justify your touching faith in me."

He snorted and hauled out one of those secondhand rubber gloves he calls a cigar. I took advantage of the milling crowd to find a seat on the opposite side of the rink. He would have covered this grand opening himself but for a wooden leg he won for his work with the Union army. He still intended to write up an account of the evening, but he wanted a skater's-eye view of the festivities as well. He had more than once hinted that he expected a skater's eye would mainly view the ceiling.

It was a nice enough ceiling, but he was doomed to disappointment if he thought I would spend my time studying it. Outside of literature, my accomplishments are scant. I am no decoration to the territory I infest. I mean to say that though I have penned many a thrilling tale of the bold, brave men of the West, I am not myself one of their number. I do ride a horse, if that is what you

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consider Batears. (I will not give my opinion, which would be as accurate as it is unprintable.) I can rope my own foot at a distance of not more than a yard. As for shooting, I could maybe hit the broad side of a barn if somebody walked up to it first to calm it and hold it steady while I fired. I am simply too intellectual for athletic pursuits, unlike the heroes of my novels (many of which are still available at reasonable prices and highly suitable for birthday and holiday giving), and am honest enough to admit this.

And yet, as a skater, I am a veritable Bayard, a Deadeye. I have certificates to attest to this, signed even by some who, no doubt from jealousy of my personal charm, had reason to wish me no honor. But perhaps this is not the place to boast of my trophies.

It was agreed that the evening would have been a complete success if only on the basis of the dinner. Charley Pearce's cooks did not take cuisine lightly; they ran to beef and potatoes and cabbage, all done up in some kind of highly addictive gravy. Waiters on roller skates saw to it that our glasses were not allowed to lead an empty life. The first great surprise of the evening was that anyone among us could rise from the table when the meal was finished.

We then adjourned to separate rooms, the men to the left and the ladies to the right, where we checked our footgear and took up shining leather boots with wheels. Charley Pearce had spared no expense: not for his customers some cast-iron axles to clamp onto their boots. He had invested in row on row of shining, laced skating machines, in sizes from grandfather to grandchild. Most of us had never seen them looking this good.

A different crowd rolled out of those rooms than had walked in. Husbands and wives, who minutes before had been bellowing at each other over the polite number of slices of beef to take, now blushed as they joined hands. Men with barely enough grace to lumber along the sidewalk could spin across the glistening floor, pick up two cups of punch from the tables now pushed back against the walls, and carry them back to their partners without spilling a drop. Johnny Bright, ordinarily too lazy too close his eyes when he went to sleep, was skating intricate figures he wouldn't have bothered to draw in the dust with his finger.

It seemed that some people in the crowd came from more favored states, where ice skating was a matter of course rather than the byproduct of a cli-

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matic catastrophe, and found wheel skating similar. Others, it was rumored, had helped Charley Pearce pay back some of his construction costs by renting skates days in advance of this opening so as to get in some practice. Oh, a few men found their skates to be as unmannered as the horses they were called upon to break. And one or two delicate ladies slipped and fell, though I noticed they did so only when certain young men were near enough to make the catch.

But by and large, it was an exhibition of style and grace to gladden the eye and tickle the heart. The only dissenter was Postmaster Andersen, who sat in a corner of the rink scribbling down the names of roller-skaters, to be used in a Truth-seeker sermon at some future date. He did not indulge in roller-skating himself. But journalism, as I know and he found out, can be thirsty work, and he refreshed himself frequently from one of the punchbowls. So refreshed was he, as time went by, that he never noticed how some miscreant switched paper on him. What he eventually turned in to Dr. McCosh was not a list of skaters but the text of a rather warm joke. (I would set it down in its entirety here, but I am saving it for Sunday school.)

Widow Lawrence, who was accompanying me around and around the floor, told me that I was very naughty and entirely too proud of myself. "Is there anything vainer than you writers?" she cried, in the middle of a figure-eight.

"Yes," I told her. "Our efforts to make a living wage."

She laughed at that, though not as much as she had at the joke on the page (of which she had seen only the first line). She might have laughed more, but her attention was distracted.

"Look!" she ordered. So I looked.

We had passed, or been passed by, Miss Boyd on several occasions in the course of our journey. Sometimes she was paired with Joe Cooper; at other times she skated along with Red Gamble. She was smiling, but still the teacher, for even as she skated with one beau or another, she frequently lifted one hand to check the time on the watch she wore around her neck. Schoolteachers must keep regular hours, and she could not forget the schoolhouse and how she had to be there on schedule. Red seemed to find this irritating, but Joe was more clock-inclined.

Time seemed to be the crux of the matter under discussion now. One or the other of the gentlemen felt that his rival

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had been out on the floor longer than the allotted turn. The other felt otherwise. We were not close enough to hear all that was said, though a fierce statement of "I'm not in the mood for a fight, but I could force myself" did reach our ears.

Miss Boyd stood back from the argument as if watching a spelling bee in which she had coached both sides. Mayor Boyd himself had spent most of the evening on the sidelines, sipping something red from a crystal glass and studying his daughter, his face a bit wistful, one eye twinkling with a tear. But he was a man of action, and when Red and Joe reached the pushing stage, he rose to his feet and charged across to them. When everyone is on skates, shoving becomes very serious.

A dozen or so couples were pausing to hear the outcome, but there was not much to hear. Joe rolled away from them, his face red and getting redder as some of the onlookers remarked on this retreat. He turned in his skates and departed. The orchestra, on a signal from the mayor, struck up a happier tune, and the crowd skated on.

But Miss Boyd stayed where she was. "It seems a bit chilly, does it not?" she noted when her father went back to his seat. "And I have left my sweater at home."

"Chilly!" snorted the Widow Lawrence as we sailed past. "Cool as a cuspidor, I do think!"

Merrily we rolled along. Red crossed the floor to turn in his skates as well and set off into the night to fetch the required garment.

The schoolmistress was not the only skater to notice the temperature, but her opinion ran against the consensus. Fans were coming out, and tightly-twisted hair was undoing itself in the moist, warm air. Some very strictly brought-up young ladies were loosening their clothes, willing to risk catching a cold if they could thereby catch something more useful. Other ladies were resting on benches near the punch-bowls, comparing their partners. The gentlemen they had sent to fetch cool punch were holding similar whispered conferences.

I escorted the Widow Lawrence to one of these resting spots and then asked Charley Pearce if we couldn't open a window or two before the entire population of Xandra's Hollow melted. He called Constable Wilson over, and the three of us set off to do our duly-do.

"Start with the corner windows, I guess," said Charley. "And see how that does it. We open the middle ones, we'll

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have the wind blowing straight across the floor." And as he did not need to mention, the center windows would be too much temptation to the more excitable young men in the crowd. Tossing furniture out the window strikes one as high wit if one is that age and has drunk that much punch.

Like the windows in most public buildings, these were meant to open but had their own opinions about it. We struggled with the first for several minutes before discovering that, in the rush to get everything finished for the grand opening, the carpenters had varnished it shut. The constable and I set off for the next window, but Charley Pearce happened to glance outside.

In the voice of one who has just remarked that the children have filled his hat with flour, and is wondering why, he told us, "The back of the schoolhouse is on fire."

We rushed to verify this. Naturally, one doesn't like to break up a party with such news, so Constable Wilson broke it gently by bellowing, "The schoolhouse is on fire!"

As the room rumbled with comment, he took off for the front stairs. A yard from the door, he paused. The clamor of conversation paused, too, as we all looked at one another.

Every ablebodied citizen of Xandra's Hollow was standing in a second story room wearing roller skates that laced pretty much right up to the knee.

Ideas are a writer's profession, and I had not myself been backward when it came to those apparently bottomless bowls of punch. An idea occurred to me, and forgetting the presence of everyone else, I determined to experiment. I sped to one of the punchbowls and threw it on the floor. The tablecloth followed.

Charley Pearce was inclined to protest, but the Widow Lawrence had joined me, understanding what was in my foggy brain better than I did. She took one end of the plank that formed the table, and I took the other. We raced to the stairs, and let it fly. The plank had barely time to stop quivering before I stepped onto it, remarked, "Eehay!," and started down.

I was neither too heroic, nor too full of punch, to notice, in the space of time it took me to roll to the first floor, that I was picking up more speed than I genuinely knew what to do with. I hoped my memory had not failed me along with my sense of self-preservation and that the front of the rink was as I remembered it.

As I meditated on this, I hit the front door, spun it wide, and proceeded out onto the side-

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walk. I had time to stick out a hand and catch one of the wooden columns that supported the porch roof. My shoulder considered parting company with my arm when I swung out over the street, but I let go of the column first, coming back around to the sidewalk. I was facing the schoolhouse now, and it was just as well that that was the direction I wanted, for my speed had not slackened.

I shot toward the conflagration, startling a couple who thought themselves concealed in a darkened doorway down the block. I had little time to notice them. Obstructions threatened me at every hand: sleeping dogs, benches under store windows, signs hung out over store doors. I reached the end of the block and jumped to the street, hoping the spring thaw had not sneaked up on us, no matter how gladdening to the heart a warm spring day might be.

Only after I had made the jump up to the next sidewalk did I hear the thunder. This struck me as an inessential complication. I glanced glowering into the sky but saw only the moon and twinkling stars. Yet there was thunder, despite a lack of clouds to shelter it. I looked back.

The whole town was roller-skating down the sidewalk. Mayor Boyd and the Widow Lawrence were leading the population, but they were following me.

Not everyone in town was a master of the skating arts, of course. Some missed that wooden support outside the rink, and whipped out into the street. Reassuring splashes from Dr. McCosh's horse trough told us they would not sail on through town and skate forever in the haunted hills. Some jumped out into the street on purpose and tried to mount waiting horses, to their own frustration and the horses' amusement. Others failed to make the leap at the end of the block and, falling, tripped up those behind them.

The cheerfulness was augmented by the presence of three local men known to me only as, respectively, "The Colonel," "The Major," and "The Captain," who skated right down the center of the street. Having consumed enough punch to think themselves on old battlefields, they waved imaginary swords and shouted conflicting orders to regroup, retreat, and attack. One or two other veterans, similarly filled with punch, took cover behind barrels until the battle ended.

Still, a majority of the thundering horde did manage to approach the schoolhouse. As we entered the neighborhood, we spread out into a line leading

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to the fire station, just a block to the left of the halls of education. While the experts hauled out the pump wagon and hose, we civilians took charge of stacks and stacks of buckets.

When Charley Pearce had spotted the flames, they were breaking through the rear wall of the schoolhouse. These were young flames, easily discouraged by the men with the hose. We with the buckets handed water down the line and in through the front door, where it was used to damp down desks and make sure the stuffed alligator came to no harm. The hose was eventually brought around to our side to take care of business.

When the tumult and shouting had died, we smoke-smudged captains and kings took stock of the damage. Most of it had occurred in the rear of the building, which was the front of the classroom. The blackboard and the big desk that had served Miss Boyd as pulpit and throne were mere memories; the floor beneath them would never be the same cheerful floor again. Her big portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and Cleveland had gone where the good times go. Most of her other prints and maps were smoke-soaked and dripped ashy water.

But the roof looked solid yet, and we had saved all but two of the children's desks, with all their inscriptions intact. And save for a layer of grime, Miss Boyd's exhibitions of culture and history still stood in disciplined ranks along the shelves. (I knew you'd be worrying about the alligator.)

We wiped the smoke from our eyes, coughed some more from our lungs, and stepped outside to report to those who had been farther back in the bucket brigade. We found ourselves in the middle of a police brigade instead; we had missed the entire trial.

"Better let him go, friends," Mayor Boyd was saying with deep regret. A ghostly figure in white stood shivering at the center of the court.

A bewildered and rather irritated Reverend Doctor McCosh had been hauled from his bed and dragged before the mayor to answer for arson. The people of Xandra's Hollow were not in a good mood, but they were inclined to be fair, particularly to a man shivering in his nightshirt. The posse that had collected him and dragged him in, a vicarious skater whether he approved or not, had discovered that the reverend doctor owned only the one pair of pants. It was even now hanging on a clothesline in his kitchen. The chances that a man, no matter how moved by the spirit, would sneak out in the night in soak-

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ing trousers, or no trousers at all, seemed narrow indeed.

Reverend McCosh had gathered some of his wits and, understanding that he was no longer in danger, prepared to blister us with a sermon. But the self-appointed keepers of the peace were still wearing skates and rolled away with him into the darkness before he could begin.

The mayor watched them go, none too happy to see a good suspect ruined that way. He slapped large hands onto his belt. "Who else in this town would want to burn the school?" he demanded.

Someone in the crowd cried, "Oh!"

We looked around to see Miss Boyd skate up to Joe Cooper and take his sleeve. "You shouldn't have done it, Joseph," she whispered. "Not for me."

Joe scratched his head. Miss Boyd spied Red Gamble, who had also been part of the posse. "Or was it you, Mordecai?" she asked.

"I . . ." he began.

Miss Boyd shook Joe's sleeve. "It was only an expression of mine to say I was married to my work. You can't have thought . . ."

He opened his mouth to speak, and she twisted her head toward Red. "It was done for love, I know," she said, "but it was still a criminal act."

Both men's open mouths shut, and their eyes locked on each other. You could see them preparing to confess, each before the other man could.

Constable Wilson, streaked with soot and water, came up behind them. "Maybe both you boys better come along with me," he said.

"No!" cried Miss Boyd, charging between the men to plant herself in the constable's path. "You can't arrest them! It was all a mistake!"

The constable paused. And indeed, Miss Boyd looked suddenly so earnest, so young, so blue of eye and pink of lip that for a moment I nearly forgot myself. But myself has a way of pushing back to the forefront of my mind.

I rolled over to join the meeting. "Excuse me. I don't believe you have to take these two men in."

The constable glared at me but was glad of my presence. I was something he could deal with if need be. "We got to hold them on suspicion, anyhow," he said. "They both had reason to do it, and now I think of it, they both left the place just before we noticed the fire."

"True enough," I said. "But not to set any fires. Look at them. They were too busy for arson. As I came out of the rink, I saw them come out of the doorway of Cooper's store,

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where they'd been trying to gouge out each other's eyes and bite off a few assorted ears."

And in the light of the lamps and torches that had been brought to the scene, everyone could see that it was true. Joe Cooper's left eye was swollen nearly shut, and Red Gamble's face was bleeding from several cuts that Miss Boyd would certainly have noticed had he worn them to skate with her.

"I guess that's so, Wilson," said the mayor. "Better let them go, too. We've still got this business of arson to figure out."

"Not only arson," I told him, "but theft." I turned to Miss Boyd. "I was going to break it to you later, ma'am, but one of your Clocks of History is missing."

She tossed off an impatient shrug. "No doubt it melted."

I raised an eyebrow. "From the heat," she said, raising an eyebrow right back at me. I could not suppress a shiver way down on my spine.

"It was pretty hot," I admitted. "You weren't scorched yourself, Miss Boyd?"

"Certainly not," she told me. "I was outside, with . . ." Severe lips, looking suddenly less pink, snapped shut, and those schoolteacher eyes tried to peel and dice me.

"Outside," I said. "Yet you knew which clock was missing from the display." I pointed to the schoolhouse. "Any of you boys and girls ever bother to look at Miss Boyd's Clocks of History? Do you remember the Candle Clock of Alfred? King Alfred had a candle with rings painted on it, so he could tell how long he'd been reading by checking what ring the candle'd burned down to. It sat in a cast-iron holder, which I do not think melted. I think it made an elegant timing device, lit and standing in the middle of a stack of, oh, penmanship exercises laced with kerosene. The fire wouldn't start until Miss Boyd was skating in full view of the whole town."

The teacher's eyes were wide, and her face was red. "Why," she demanded, "would I do any such thing?"

"Fear of steady work," I told her. "The council might talk your father into issuing that lifetime contract, and you'd never leave home for more exotic lands. But if there was no schoolhouse, you might be able to slip your leash while the new one was being built. Someone else—anyone who was handy—would go to prison for the crime. I suppose you would even have helped your father kick off the campaign to raise funds for the new building."

Miss Boyd lost her dignity at no point in my declaration, but it was not running smoothly

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when she replied, "Why, that's . . . the insult . . . I don't . . . sir, I . . ."

A writer knows this trick: tossing words around until some of them come together and make sense. She kept it up, two words at a time, for some time while the crowd closed ranks around us. Only Joe Cooper and Red Gamble slipped away, unwilling to watch any more of this.

Someone had to pronounce sentence, and it was not in my jurisdiction. The mayor finally set a hand on his daughter's nearest wrist and rumbled, "Come home, Alexandra."

Her dignity was severely damaged by that. "Oh!" she said, trying to pull away. "Surely you . . . I can explain!"

"Explain it at home, Alexandra," he said. And because it is not easy to escape a captor whose hand is on your wrist, particularly if you are both on roller skates, Alexandra Boyd went along home.

The Reverend Doctor Lucius A. McCosh used it all as the subject of a sermon, on how a longing for the exotic and fantastic can lead to sin. It was the last sermon he preached in Xandra's Hollow. Mayor Boyd let it be known that the sermon was displeasing, and Lucius McCosh was seized with missionary fervor and set off for parts unknown.

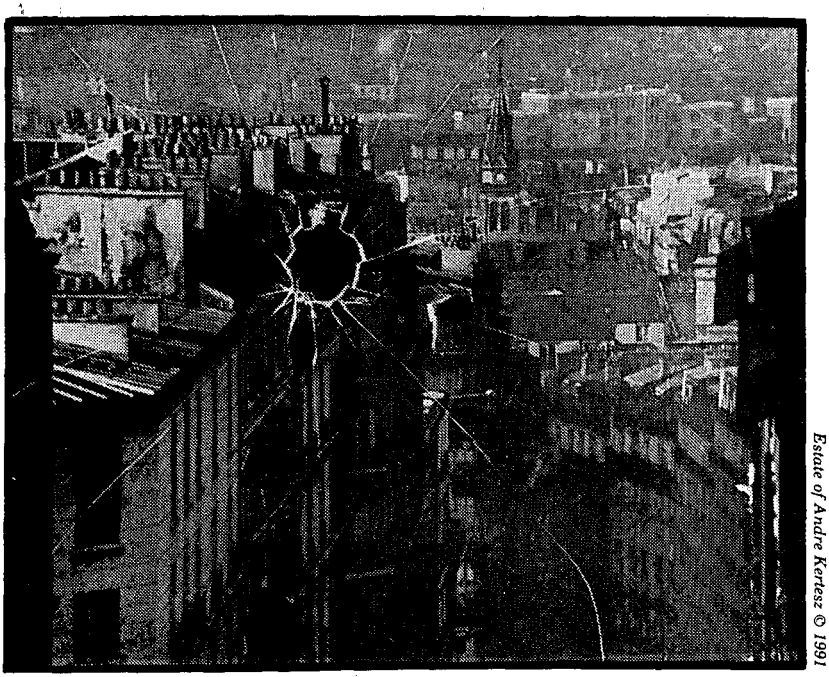
No legal action was ever taken in the matter of arson. The mayor paid for the new schoolhouse out of his own pocket, so the townspeople decided it was all a family matter. I have no concrete evidence on how Mayor Boyd dealt with his daughter, though I do know that any of her students who chanced to meet her after that greeted her with an expression of mingled sympathy and satisfaction.

And she signed the certificate that was presented to me by the town in honor of my skating ability. Her penmanship was perhaps a bit less perfect than usual, and she blotted the loop in the final d. I can only suppose she was not used to signing her name standing.

(continued from page 5)
bringing this issue's Mysterious Photograph to our attention. About a year ago, we got a note from John C. Hume, then fourteen, of Oakland, Maine, suggesting the André Kertész photo you will find on page 55. We had used a number of Mr. Kertész's photographs in the past, but that one had eluded us. We are pleased to present it now, thanks to John Hume (and the Kertész estate).

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

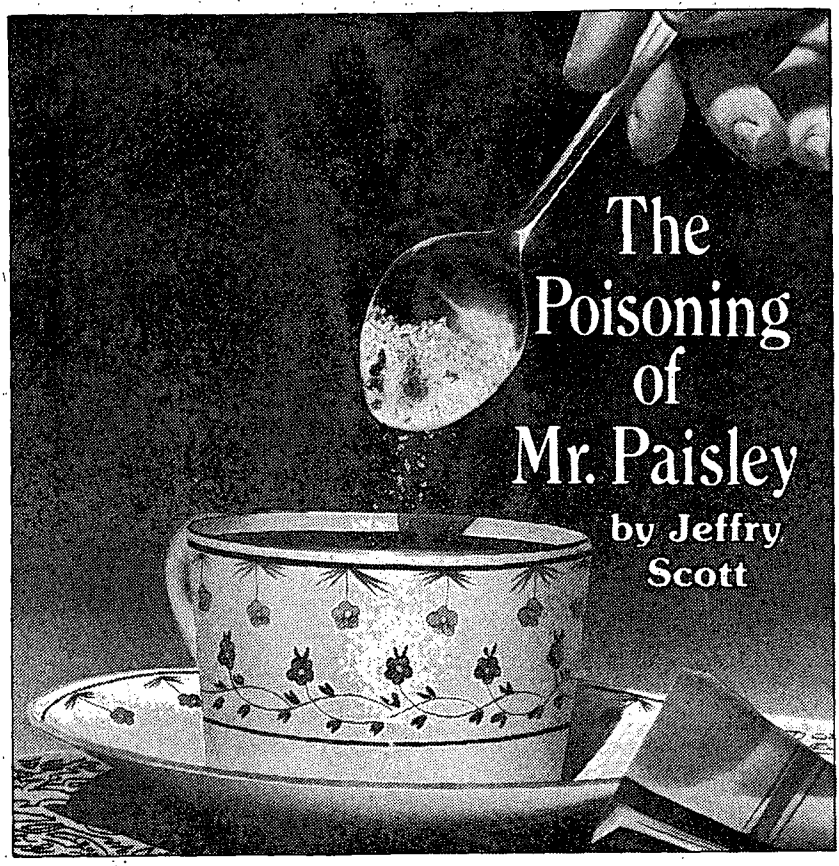


Estate of Andre Kertesz © 1991

Black holes are real! There's one in Paris! And . . . hmm. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

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The Poisoning of Mr. Paisley

by Jeffry Scott

There had never been doubt over how James Paisley died—poison, not self-administered.

The substance was stubborn, slow to be eliminated from the human system. The pathologist reported that Paisley had ingested tiny doses, not fewer than three and possibly twice as many, before a fatal level was reached. The picture was of thoroughly premeditated murder: an unsuspected, imperceptible assault carried out over a pitilessly long time.

They knew who was dead and what had killed him. There the certainties ended.

Enquiries were thorough,

Illustration by E.T. Steadman

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and fruitless. After a month, efforts slackened. Fairly soon, whatever the official version, the case was shelved. The Wessex-Coastal police force, like most others, was in some sense a business venture as well as a public service. And thus obliged to be cost effective and budget conscious.

James Paisley had no living relatives. Overtly blameless —that cliche murderee, the man without enemies—he was buried as quietly as he had lived. His body had been held at the Southwestern Forensic Center. When it went into the ground at last, only a junior executive from his employers, a couple of policemen, and the undertaker's staff attended the funeral.

If he had an epitaph, it came from Detective-Superintendent Bradd. "I've always believed poisoners are cruel," said Ron Bradd, "but this one was a right sadist." He was as wrong as he could be. But that was the end of it.

For a while.

She was personable rather than attractive, with a thin, clever face—eyes a bit too close together for prettiness—and fair hair as short and neat as her nails. "Welcome," said Superintendent Bradd, almost meaning it. "You seem to have landed an . . . interesting assignment."

Inspector Jill Tierce put her head on one side, with the hint of a smile. "Hate to contradict you, sir, but it's a bogus job, to keep me out of mischief. If I hadn't been told to play myself in gradually, this lark would have driven me into deep depression. Sort of mood where you stand on a street corner offering strangers a fiver to cut your blessed throat."

Now the smile had a trace of ruefulness. She had transferred to Wessex-Coastal the previous year and hardly knew Bradd, except by sight and reputation. "Thanks all the same, sir."

Superintendent Bradd made a noncommittal noise, leaning back in his chair. This lass was very clever or very gauche. His money was on the former. For the moment, he would play it on the assumption that Inspector Tierce was being diplomatic, in an oops-what-have-I-blurted-out-now style. "Sit you down, and let's not sir and inspector ourselves to death, eh? After what you went through, we are lucky to see you back so soon."

Jill Tierce had gone up against the ram-raiders. Three high-performance vehicles would be stolen, one driven through the window of a shop,

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the other two backed in, trunks open. After plundering and loading, which took no more than three minutes, the pair of cars were driven away at top speed. The system was basic and brutal, but it worked well. Shops had to display their merchandise, the police could not guard retail premises around the clock, the robbers rode with scanners tuned to constabulary frequencies. The odds were on their side.

Inspector Tierce had adjusted those odds by picking prime targets and putting deceptive radio traffic on the air when a raid seemed imminent. It worked, but at the cost of weeks in hospital, and very nearly her life. Having sprung the ambush, she had leaped on one of the cars and clung there for a quarter mile before being hurled loose.

Maybe not so clever, Bradd speculated. And aloud: "All better now, then?"

"I nagged the medical board into approving me for light duties. Four half days a week." She shrugged fractionally. "The deputy chief came up with this scheme for reviewing cases; the Paisley poisoning was the first on the list, alphabetically." Studying the wall to one side of Bradd's left ear, Jill Tierce said, "I needn't stick to alphabetical order. God willing, I shall be fully fit by the end of the month, and the whole idea will be dropped. They won't tie an active inspector up on forlorn hopes. It's what the Yanks call make-work. Suppose I ought to thank my stars I escaped touring junior schools, drumbeating for the boys and girls in blue."

"Don't pile it on too thick, my dear," Bradd advised, and she had the grace to color. "I'm not proud, I do not imagine myself infallible, and I have never been one of those idiots who gets territorial over their cases."

"I hear you," Jill Tierce acknowledged, and the atmosphere eased. "I've been reading myself in on the Paisley thing, sir. Can't pretend to have mastered it yet. If you wouldn't mind talking me through it . . . "

"It's a pig," he said, simply. "Poisonings are rare, as you know. I'm glad you are trying again, and I'll tell you why. Poisoners are special. It's not like, say, lashing out at your husband in a temper, and you happen to be holding the steam iron at the time. Poison is deliberate, *cruel*. I've had direct experience of only a couple of poisoners. Both of 'em tried again, after getting away with it once. So it wouldn't surprise me if somebody else joins James

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Paisley one of these days."

Inspector Tierce was thoughtful. "And I came in here moaning about it. I need kicking. Doubt if I shall do any good, though, after all this time. This isn't BS, sir, but if you had no luck when the case was piping hot . . . "

"I consider myself duly flattered," he observed dryly. "Sun's over the yardarm, whatever that is. Come on, we'll step out and you can buy me a drink."

Their drinks were of mineral water. Bradd never mixed alcohol with driving and was due the far side of the county after lunch. Jill Tierce was forbidden the hard stuff while under medication.

Usually the superintendent hid away in the secluded bar known as the Attic, but opted for the terrace outside the quayside pub as if that had been his plan all along. He'd noticed that she started limping slightly within a hundred yards of police headquarters. Whether clever or motor-mouthed, brave or rash, he couldn't doubt her determination.

"Paisley was a widower," Bradd began. "Whoever you spoke to insisted he had no enemies. No friends, either. Colorless chap, not even a bore —they get noticed. People who worked for or with Paisley for years were hard put to it recalling his first name. He was Mr. Paisley to them, that tells you something. None of them knew what he did with himself of an evening, either. Not a drinker, didn't mix. Creature of habit: went home at half-five, picked up a takeaway meal. Or he'd stop off and buy a pork pie, Cornish pasty, for his supper. Couldn't wait to put himself away for the night. No TV set even. He listened to classical music on his radio; from the dust on the dial you could tell it was always on that station."

Superintendent Bradd, keeping sidelong attention on her, smiled crookedly.

"You're thinking nobody is that dull," he said. "Paisley was fifty-five, no age these days, and he was a widower. So there could have been a woman. Or another man. I am certain there wasn't, and believe me, I looked." He pondered briefly. "I wonder whether his place is on the market yet . . . There was a hitch over probate, some legal snag. Paisley's solicitor is Rankin, down by the Fish Market; worth checking to see if the flat is still empty. Seeing the place would be worth an hour of me banging away about him. Very

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sad. It was . . . monastic."

"Surely he didn't always get his food out?" Inspector Tierce objected.

"Well, the kitchen was pristine. His generation's idea of catering for themselves stops at boiling an egg. Weekends, Paisley had his meals at various restaurants. Other times, he lunched in the firm's canteen."

"That's why you, we, concentrated on the workplace," she murmured.

"Right. Pathologist said the stuff that did for Paisley was 'administered in a liquid vehicle.' Posh way of saying he drank it. In tea, most likely. And our tame experts say the final dose was ingested, as they put it, within two hours of death."

Retrieving data in her mind, Inspector Tierce said, "Paisley died in the office around twelve thirty P.M. He'd arrived on the dot of nine thirty A.M. and not left the premises meanwhile. Yes . . . it was given to him there, but . . ." She trailed away, reluctant to challenge her companion.

Bradd was good-humored. "But he might have been poisoned at his home on other occasions? Could be, but doubtful. I believe whoever killed Paisley was a workmate. So far as his neighbors' observations go, which I grant you is not far, this chap did not have visitors. Even if he did—you call on somebody, they offer you a drink . . . they make it and hand you the cup or glass. Quite difficult to tamper with theirs. It's different, of course, with members of the family or old friends, they might make themselves at home, wander out to the kitchen and make themselves tea or coffee, ask if you want one as well. Only Paisley had no relatives or close friends."

"What's the form at this firm where he worked—tea from vending machines, a tea lady, or do they make their own?" she asked.

"Yes," Superintendent Bradd replied, poker-faced. "Sorry, couldn't resist that. There's a vending machine in the main lobby. For the benefit of people working late—Nixon's runs radio commercials and has a twenty-four-hour order service, customers can phone in any time, giving their credit card details. Several departments have electric kettles, a few friends or desk neighbors keep a kitty, and secretaries brew up on request. At eleven A.M. and again at four P.M., a canteen woman brings a trolley with tea and coffee urns and tours the building."

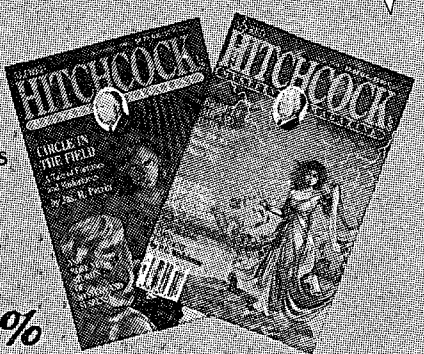
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riches," Jill Tierce quoted wryly.

"You ain't heard nothing yet. Paisley was a teetotaller but he loved his tea. Got through half a dozen cups a day, minimum. Sometimes from the trolley, sometimes the machine. And he contributed to two different kitties, in the main office and another upstairs in the records section, where he spent a lot of time." Bradd raised a meaty hand. "Method was never the problem. Uncover the motive and the rest must follow.

"But motive was what, no pun intended, stopped us dead. Somebody hated James Paisley enough to kill him. And we never got a sniff of anyone who fitted the bill." He grunted frustratedly. "Here's a man neither liked nor disliked. No more than a worker ant."

She grinned at a thought. "Ants get where they're not wanted . . . "

"I wondered the same. Borrowed a Met' Police fraud specialist to run the rule over Nixon's. Plus a quiet word with my contact at Inland Revenue. No joy—they aren't fiddling their tax, nobody is embezzling. One or two salesmen pad their expenses, but that's an open secret and the company wouldn't have taken action over it. We're talking about a bonus governed by implicit agreements. The firm is clean—so the late Mr. Paisley was not blackmailing anybody or planning to blow the whistle on them. In any case, he was a minor employee, glorified clerk, what could he know?"

The superintendent checked his watch. "Good luck, my dear, and that's not sarcasm. By the way, there's a woman at Nixon's, Gloria Pool . . . She knew Paisley as well as anyone did. And she's—what's that jargon they use in experiments? A control, that's it. No axe to grind. She left Nixon's for four months and went to Wales on family business. Didn't start work again until long after he died, so she is in the clear."

Gloria Pool stated: "It's a mystery. Don't look down your nose at me, luv, I'm not that much of an idiot. I don't mean mystery as in unsolved crime. To this day, I can't believe poor old James was actually murdered. The mystery is why anyone bothered. Why kill a dead man?"

Mrs. Pool, old enough to be Jill Tierce's mother, obviously ate too much yet contrived to look voluptuous rather than fat. Her skirt was too short, the sweater too tight, her hair was emphatically blonde and emphatically artificially so. In-

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spector Tierce liked her a lot.

"You'll have to explain that, Gloria."

"Call me Glore, t'other makes me think of school. 'Gloria Whittock, go to the headmaster's office.'" She shuddered theatrically, then giggled. "Quickest way to tell you about him, I knew that feller on and off for years. And just now I called him James. Never a Jimmy, even behind his back, poor sod."

"It was the dead man bit that threw me, er, Glore."

For privacy, they had left the building and were sitting on the low, ornamental wall of the parking lot. Nixon Novelties rented the whole of a 1960's brick and glass matchbox, one among many featureless, three story hutches on the city's industrial estate. Mrs. Pool crossed her legs, gave a token tug at her hemline, and explained. "James's wife went to school with me. Norma Brading, no harm in her and less personality. Waste of time trying to lead *her* into bad ways when we were teenagers." Again the giggle.

"Like calls to like: she married James Paisley. They had a nice little semidetached on that new estate, well, it was new then, overlooking the bay. Me and my second husband ran into Norma and her hubby on holiday in Devon once. We knocked around together a bit, the way you do. They were real firmly married, know the style? Wrapped up in each other, they even looked alike.

"But Norma got cancer, and it finished her in a matter of weeks. No kids, of course. What with that, and him being an orphanage boy and Norma an only child who'd lost *her* parents quite young . . . he must have felt terribly alone, afterwards." She grimaced, hearing herself. "Bloody fool, Glore, he *was* alone."

Jill Tierce, eyes half closed and enjoying the spring sun on her face, rationalized that she wasn't taking a statement but immersing herself in background colors and textures. Though a cynic might argue that she was idling while listening to gossip.

"Anyway, Hubby Number Two did a runner, so it was back to work for me," Gloria Pool rattled on. "And who should be office manager at Nixon's but James Paisley. He'd never struck me as a dynamo, but now . . . He did the job, earned his pay. But he was going through the motions, not really with us. Never started a conversation, so nobody talked to him. He didn't notice, bless him. But it made me sad."

Snapping a cigarette alight,

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she jetted smoke defiantly. "Me, I need a feller around. In bed, goes without saying; and for cuddles and company. No fun in watching telly without somebody you can say, 'Why are we bothering with this rubbish?' to. All right, I gave James the come-on. Blank wall. But fellers can be slow on the uptake, so I gave it another go, asked him round for a meal and that, some night." This time her giggle was wicked. "A stone statue could have twigged what 'that' was, time I'd finished."

Mrs. Pool sighed and shook her head.

"He wasn't interested. Okay, I'm not to every bloke's taste. But it wasn't that. Sexwise, there was nobody home."

"Was he gay?" Inspector Tierce asked.

"James? Give over! No, he was like . . . neutral." Gloria Pool ground the cigarette under a high-heeled shoe. "For him and Norma it was down to true love. Without her, he just switched off, marking time until he could join her. Not from choice, it was all he could think to do. James turned up for work, went back to his flat, and waited to do it again the next day.

"There was nothing to kill, luv." She stood up, brushing crumbs of cement from her ample rear. "Poor devil, breathing but dead on his feet. Only wanted to be left alone. Killing him makes no sense."

Tony Edgar, chairman and managing director—"There hasn't been a Nixon at Nixon Novelties for years"—waved Inspector Tierce to a chair. Seal-sleek in his beautiful grey suit, he had something of a seal's portly litheness.

"Beats me why anyone would kill Paisley," he claimed cheerfully. "Frankly, I'm too intent on making this outfit work to take much interest in the wage slaves, per se. But from what everybody has said since, the guy was a zero, a cipher. Getting polished off was the most interesting thing about him."

"You obviously took his death very hard, sir."

Unruffled, Mr. Edgar swung his leather swivel chair to port and starboard as he spoke. "The guy's death was wrong, regrettable, I will do anything needful to help clear it up, nail the guilty party. That's of more use than empty sentiment." He smiled, round eyes warming. "I take a bit of getting used to, that's all. My friends reckon I'm a great guy."

Jill Tierce found herself mirroring that smile. Abrasive mind, charming manner, an in-

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teresting mixture. And he knew it.

"What brings the police back? Is there a new development, then?"

"We are reviewing certain evidence," she told him.

"When in doubt, ask the same questions all over again," he translated. "What can I tell you?"

"There appear to be no personal undertones to Mr. Paisley's killing. It occurred to me that the motive might lie . . . I'm not sure how to put this . . . in something he had or had not done, at work, or even threatened to do or not do. You follow?"

"Just about, and you're barking up the wrong tree." Tony Edgar spoke decidedly, not defensively. "My hair's still very tidy from your Superintendent Bradd's running a fine-tooth comb through the business. We're not up to anything here except making a reasonable living."

Half amused, Edgar went on, "Nixon's is a perfect microcosm of modern Britain—we don't *make* anything, we buy abroad, from Taiwan to Belgium, then package and market it and hope for the best. There are no rackets for Paisley to stumble on—or carry out himself. We do business gifts, wholesale, with a mail order division for your stay-sharp cutlery, miracle windshield wipers, and so forth. The actual merchandise is in warehouses up in Scotland. Apart from samples, there is nothing here to pilfer. Mail order generates big money, that's why we do it, but no cash comes here, and remarkably little in the way of checks, money orders. Everybody has a credit card these days."

Edgar stopped swiveling. "I have thought about this. It's an intellectual challenge: what could our Mr. Paisley have found out, or done, that put his life at risk? The answer is, nothing. And I'm the one who would know. Paisley ran the office, in a nonmanagement sense. He made sure stationery orders were up to date, kept the holiday roster, routine stuff."

"So who replaced him?"

Tony Edgar said pleasantly, "This is like tennis, you serve and I return. Most of Paisley's duties are being done by other people. Senior secretaries order stationery now, the Ledger Office computer can weed out duplicated requests or suspiciously big amounts. Vacations are looked after by a school-leaver here under the government's work experience program. She's good at charts. Nobody inherited the poor guy's empire, some of it got shared

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out, and we hired a junior for the remainder. I rest my case . . . "

But Edgar hadn't finished. "My turn for a question. How about having dinner with me? Not right away, of course; when you've finished your duties here."

Staying poised, she countered, "I'll take that under advisement."

"Legal jargon is too deep for me, but I hope that means a raincheck. Better than a flat refusal, I suppose. Nice to meet you, anyway." He was on the phone, bullying a supplier, before the door closed behind her.

Cheeky devil, she thought. She had reached her car before noticing that the nagging ache in her injured leg had returned. Maybe a mild pass did as much good as the hospital's physiotherapy.

Detective-Sergeant Dick Ranulph spotted Jill Tierce stalled in High Street traffic and loped over. Sliding into the passenger seat, he leered at her reflection in the windshield. "Show me yours, boss, and I'll show you mine."

"Care to rephrase that, sergeant?"

Unabashed, Ranulph said, "Word is the deputy chief has tasked you with cracking that poisoning case, what Bradd couldn't make head nor tail of. Bring me up to speed on it, and I'll tell you how things are going, back at the ranch." Sergeant Ranulph had been her second in command on the team set up to deal with the ram-raiders. The team remained in being, and she was expected to lead it again eventually.

She said coldly, "Watch your lip, Dickie. I mean it. The super never put a foot wrong on the Paisley case. I'm just passing time until I am fit again. Don't ever crack jokes like that, even between ourselves."

"Message received and understood." He was duly subdued but not for long. "So what's happening about Paisley?"

When Inspector Tierce finished telling him, Dick Ranulph was derisive. "I don't believe in blokes with no enemies. Or blokes with no sex lives."

"Everyone is not like you," she reminded him.

Sergeant Ranulph was stubborn. "There's always a bird in the background, boss. You're buying this profile of Paisley as some kind of hermit-monk just because he didn't fancy one old slag at Nixon's and nobody ever caught him with a woman. Too trusting, you are."

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She pulled in to the county police headquarters' parking lot. "All right, Dickie, you could have done better."

"Too late now. But if I had given his crib a spin, really searched where he lived, I bet I would have found signs of a woman. Unless he was gay, in which case there'd have been evidence of a feller. Thanks for the lift, boss."

"Not so fast, a bargain's a bargain, what are you lot getting up to while Mum is away?" Jill Tierce demanded. It took him half an hour to satisfy her curiosity. By then she was wearier than she would have admitted, body and nerves crying out for a hot bath and an early night.

Next morning, Inspector Tierce had to admit that the doctors were right. The consultant had opined that she lacked the self-discipline to stick to the light duties regimen; his minions had agreed, grimly. Her first supposed half-day had stretched to a full shift, and serve her right, she felt as if she had worked seventy-two hours straight, crowned by ten rounds of boxing.

Contrite and slightly worried, she passed a couple of deskbound hours on Paisley case reports and spent the rest of the day with her parents.

* * *

Jill Tierce's mother was uncharacteristically quiet. "I'm sorry, darling, nothing is wrong. Not with us, at any rate. It's one of my old ladies."

"Now, there's a change," George Tierce teased. He was shedding leaf mold on the carpet, having come in from gardening to greet his daughter.

Mrs. Tierce was on the management committee of a local charity for elderly single women. She made it her business to visit at least one of them weekly. It was, she said, rewarding though demanding, "like having a dozen cranky aged aunts."

One of these cranky aunts, she explained, had run into terrible money trouble. "Miss Brimble, too, whom I thought the most sensible of the lot. Now she has run up a phone bill for three hundred pounds, if you please."

"Couldn't it be a mistake?" Inspector Tierce suggested. "There are so many newspaper stories about extra zeros getting added to phone bills in error, scaring people out of their wits. Isn't Miss Brimble the one who keeps herself to herself, has no friends to ring?"

Mr. Tierce said, "You don't need friends to run up a big phone bill these days. Disgraceful, these chat-line ser-

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vices—tempting ads, and the charge in tiny print. Costs a pound for three minutes, and that can mount up . . . "

"Money's the least of it," said his wife. "I daresay we can help the poor old girl out, this once." Mr. Tierce winked at his daughter, pulling a mock-pained face. Unaware of the by-play, Mrs. Tierce explained, "I went through the bill for her. When I asked Miss Brimble why on earth she had spent so long hearing weather forecasts and sports reports and some ghastly link-up thing where you talk to total strangers, she said it was for the company.

"All this time we thought that woman to be antisocial, she was desperately lonely. Miss Brimble told me that sometimes she goes for days at a time without anyone talking to her. She would spend hours in the supermarket, for the illusion of—well, being part of the world. But the security people suspected her of getting her nerve up to steal something. They made it obvious and scared her away. Then she saw an advertisement for a phone number, theater information, I believe, and rang it. Only a tape recording, of course, but it talked to *her*."

Mrs. Tierce, blowing her nose, protested, "I've got hayfever or something, I'm not crying, you know I never cry." Following that with, "But it's so awful and sad, I picture her on the phone day after day, to *machines*, and I can't help crying."

"Sad," Inspector Tierce echoed abstractedly. She was thinking about James Paisley, another lonely person. Damn and blast! More drudgery, going through the phone records—duplicates of his bills had to be on file.

"Garden flat" was a blatantly false label for a converted basement, since there was no garden. One went down the side of a tall, narrow house and past a row of dustbins to find James Paisley's front door. Inside, it was surprisingly hushed for such a noisy area—Frigate Street, just off the seafront.

Inspector Tierce searched with her eyes rather than rummaging. Even if one hadn't known the context, the flat was depressing. Tiny lobby, living room, bedroom, closet-sized bathroom, and a slightly larger kitchen. *It's all so . . . meager,* she thought.

The flat was still unsold, Paisley's solicitor had told her. It had gone on the market just when interest rates made mortgages harder to get and homes

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harder to shift. (She suspected that her query had nudged an overworked and less than energetic lawyer into remembering his client's estate, a year after Paisley's passing.) Jill Tierce was glad that the man was inefficient. She expected to make no dramatic breakthrough here, she was what her father termed "too late to the party," but in a way, it was her closest physical contact with the victim.

She winced when the front door banged open. "Let the dog see the rabbit! Now we shan't be long, boss!"

Sergeant Ranulph had a day off; she had been unwary enough to mention that the flat remained vacant and undisturbed. Ranulph had insisted on "taking a dekko at the drum, bet we can turn up something tasty." He had touching faith in his superior powers.

"Don't go at it like a bull at a gate. I haven't finished looking." Sheepishly, she admitted to herself that this was a near-superstitious ritual. Nothing to do with being psychic, simply willingness to stand and stare. Occasionally her subconscious picked up a scrap of information, processed it, and suggested conclusions.

"Not much to go at, is there?" Ranulph was crestfallen. They were in Paisley's living room, dusty, forlorn, less tidy than dauntingly sparsely furnished. An armchair and an upright chair, a table and a padded footstool, a two-shelf bookcase. A mirror on a tarnished brass chain, a couple of pictures—color prints of vapid country scenes—by way of decoration. Something told Inspector Tierce that the pictures had been there when Paisley moved in.

"Charming," Dick Ranulph commented. "Puts me in mind of a waiting room."

"I think it was. He had lived here for years, Dickie. Owned the flat outright, bought it with the proceeds of the house he sold after the wife died. But he never troubled with this place. Going through the motions, Glore said, and she wasn't wrong."

Recovering his spirits, Sergeant Ranulph opened his briefcase and began arranging its contents on the table—screwdrivers, probes, a spring tape measure, and a set of hardened steel pry-bars easily mistaken for burglary tools. "We'll see, we'll see."

"Don't you dare! I got the keys from the estate agency, as a favor. We have exactly the same rights as any member of the public viewing a property for sale, Dickie. Leave a scratch on it and I'll wring your neck."

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"A scratch or two wouldn't notice, boss. This isn't Buckingham Palace. Not to worry, they'll never know I've been here." He bustled into the bedroom, and she groaned softly.

Bookcase: a Bible, tissue-thin pages reluctant to part. There from a sense of obligation, not faith. Dickens, Thackeray, Jane Austen, solid editions in various formats—bought secondhand, she guessed, and read several times since. A paperback, titled *Coming to Terms with Bereavement.* Lying flat on the top shelf, books acting as bookends, were two fat, shiny-slipcovered volumes, a biography of Oliver Cromwell and an economic history of maritime Wessex. Library books, never returned; but James Paisley was beyond worrying over fines.

Sergeant Ranulph broke her reverie. "All those books need a proper onceover, boss, page by page."

"Be my guest. What are you looking for, anyway?"

"Dirty pictures, little black book, letters from his fancy woman. Mean to tell me he spent all his free time cooped up here, not even a telly to watch, and got stuck into *Pride and Prejudice?* Believe that, and I've got a few bridges and public buildings to sell you," the sergeant scoffed.

"Mr. Bradd would have found anything of that nature." She sat on the straight chair, massaging her leg. Instinct told her that Ranulph was on the wrong track. The flat *was* monastic, a celibate's retreat.

Ranulph grunted, "My time to waste. There's a vacuum flask in my bag, coffee-no-sugar, way you like it. Have a little picnic while I give the kitchen a spin." Jill Tierce mused, *Maybe living dead men are tidy by nature.* James Paisley's solicitor had taken charge of appropriate documents—the Paisleys' marriage certificate and their birth certificates, the late wife's death certificate, an insurance policy on the flat and its fittings, and one or two outstanding bills. That left nothing in the way of clutter.

Her own flat was stuffed with unwanted ephemera: old theater programs, brochures, correspondence, scraps clipped from newspapers to be studied at leisure, sometime-never. Unhelpfully, James Paisley hadn't been a hoarder. There were such paragons; she'd had a roommate at college who tore up friends' letters as soon as they'd been read, something of which Jill was incapable.

Out in the kitchen, Sergeant Ranulph gave a whoop of excitement, and she hurried to join him.

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There was a double-drainer sink with a large cupboard beneath. Ranulph had removed the plastic wastebin filling most of the space, discovering a pile of papers behind it. Squatting beside his prize, his face was reddening. "Old newspapers, that's all. The Scouts collect them where I live, daresay they cover Frigate Street, too. He'd stow his daily paper away until there was a pile worth bothering about." But Sergeant Ranulph started a methodical search, opening and shaking each paper and the occasional Sunday supplement before setting them aside.

"The crosswords will be filled in," she forecast. "My Sherlock Holmes bit—there are two dictionaries and a synonyms guide in the bookcase."

"You're only right, boss," he reported. "Top of the class."

"What's that one, Dickie?"

Ranulph retrieved a discarded magazine and passed it to her. It was a modest little journal on recycled paper, calling itself *Country Wife*. Speed-reading, skipping entire sections, Inspector Tierce found recipes, a rural midwife's diary, nature notes.

"Joker in the pack?" Sergeant Ranulph twitched it from her fingers. "Not a dirty mag. Expect it got delivered by mistake, and he never sent it back." His disappointment was comical.

"Forget this, we're done," she decreed.

"Hang about, I've started so I shall finish." Ranulph joined her in the lobby, five minutes later. "All done and dusted. Funny, there was another of those magazines. January and April issues from last year. Maybe he bought them. Unless the delivery boy made the same mistake twice. Mine does it every other day."

By the end of the week, Jill Tierce had spoken to the majority of the dead man's colleagues.

Her findings were confirmatory, and negative. Any of the thirty or more staff at Nixon's could have poisoned Paisley's tea. The firm was efficient but, at the clerical level, not particularly structured. She had watched clerks and secretaries visit back and forth, desk to desk, department to department. Offices were open-plan, in theory, but photocopiers, partitions, islands of filing cabinets with potplants atop, blocked sightlines here and there. Sometimes secretaries made tea, often a salesman or junior executive appeared bearing a tray of plastic cups from the vending machine.

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Superintendent Bradd was right: without a motive for signpost, she was lost. Could she be seeking the wrong signpost, though?

Inspector Tierce went to the Forensic Center, in case she had missed an arcane point. The substance was a liquid, they told her. It had not been manufactured for a number of years. The substance had been developed for industrial processes, in the 1950's—preparing metal for certain welding operations, insulating electrical gear. Some garden pest compounds had incorporated the substance, too, but not for a decade. Its toxicity had been discovered and the spray formula altered.

"In idiot-speak, you're saying my chap could have been poisoned with garden spray or something that at one time lay around factories in ten gallon drums?"

Yes, the experts agreed, that was true. "Narrows the suspects to around two-thirds of the population," she observed sourly. "Gardeners and anybody who ever worked in or visited industrial sites. Terrific."

The fact that she was not expected to get any further did not console Jill Tierce. *She* had not expected it, either. All the same . . . somebody had done away with James Paisley, and not on impulse. They had either tried and tried again, or built the poison to lethal level.

There had to be a reason for such a terrible deed, carried out, by definition, in cold blood. So why couldn't they discover that reason?

Inspector Tierce went back to Nixon's out of bloody-mindedness, not hope. A few of the nightlines people, needy students or pensioners cashing in on insomnia, remained on her list. None of them would have come on duty until long after Paisley went home. But she had started, so she would damned well finish.

Gloria Pool was waiting in the parking lot, by a battered Mini with rust competing against its frivolous pink respray. "They said you'd be along soon, so I hung around. I know it's a liberty, but one of the girls who used to be here, she'd like a word."

Mrs. Pool flung sinewy, crimson-tipped hands in the air, making numerous costume rings twinkle. "When Marie Gossard gets an idea in her noddle, poor soul, she must go through with it. She's a bit slow, know what I mean? Not retarded, but . . . *different*. And shy with it. I was sorry for her when she worked here. Marie comes from up north, Tyneside way, and the accent didn't help,

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people couldn't understand what she was saying. Same for her, trying to catch on when they were showing her the ropes, around the office.

"She got fired in the end, big surprise, ha-ha. It was always in the cards. Once James snuffed it, her days were numbered."

"D'you mean—"

Taken aback, Gloria Pool laughed shortly. "God, your face! No, him and Marie weren't an item. I told you, he wasn't interested in women. He was super-patient with Marie is what it was. Except patience never came into it. He didn't care either way, which was Marie's good luck. She'd get an invoice wrong, James put her right. Get it wrong again, straight afterwards, he put her right again. Never raised his voice. Plodding on, see. Marie thought he was wonderful."

Mrs. Pool hitched up her skirt and wriggled behind the Mini's wheel. "When you see her, you'll forget any nonsense about her and James. Homely is the word. That went against her at work, too. Anyway, she wants to talk about him 'to the police lady'—must have heard you were asking around. Be nice to her, eh? She's coming here tonight, I said you wouldn't bite her head off."

* * *

Gloria Pool's verdict of homely had been an understatement. Marie Gossard was a decidedly odd-looking young woman. Hard to define why: nothing wrong with her features, individually, but they might have belonged to different people and been assembled towards the middle of a large, pallid face. Her hair was lank, her frock dowdy, evoking an overall. She was wearing sandals over dun ankle socks.

"I was the only one what cried," Marie announced, while Jill Tierce was still leading her to a bench in the reception area. Night was falling, the interior lights dim. The security man had relocked the glass doors after letting her in.

Marie had a plangent, quacking voice and the northeastern accent did make it difficult to follow her. "I cried when Mr. Paisley passed over sudden," she explained. "He was a very nice man."

"I'm sure he was," Inspector Tierce agreed blankly. "Er, is there something you want to tell me?"

The girl turned fierce. "You ought to be told the truth, that's all. I tried to tell the others, the men policemen. Everybody said Mr. Paisley was nothing. Not true. He was a lovely man. Kind. Very kind."

"Yes."

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"You don't know! You wasn't here." Marie Gossard lowered her voice. "Sorry, miss. It makes me angry, them saying bad things about him." She showed puffy, drowned fingers. "I missed the funeral, they wouldn't let me off work at the hotel." So that was the smell—detergent, washing-up water, the ghosts of countless dirty dishes.

Jill Tierce spoke gently. "Nobody says bad things about your friend. He was just a very private man. Reserved." She tried again. "Nobody knew him that well, he kept himself to himself."

"I knew him." Marie nodded several times.

On impulse, a blend of hunch and remotest possibility, Inspector Tierce asked, "Did you ever go home with him?"

A pitying smile. "My home is Newcastle, miss. Oh . . . where *he* lived." Marie pondered for a moment. "I knew where it was. Round the corner from my digs. Bottom flat. We took the same bus home. Always said goodnight to me, Mr. Paisley. He always had a hat, and he always took it off." Miming the action, she whispered, " 'Goodnight, Miss G.' He was the only one what called me Miss G. Like to a grownup. Which I am, but he showed it."

"Did he ever . . . talk about his worries, what made him happy, sad? Somebody giving him trouble?" Ashamed of the idea, Inspector Tierce had wondered whether self-contained Paisley might have confided in Marie as some people talk to children or pets, as sounding boards.

The girl was puzzled, as though the suggestion was outlandish. "Mr. Paisley was my boss, and old. What could we talk about? He just told me what to do, at work. And he was kind."

"Well, I'd better get on—"

Marie Gossard clutched her arm. "He was sick before he died. Long before. It was a secret. Don't let on at the office, he said. Only a dizzy spell. He was afraid they would make a fuss, make him stay home till he was better. 'Nothing to do with them, Miss G.,' he said. 'Our little secret, I shall be right as rain in the morning.' "

"How did you know about it, Marie?"

"He came over funny on the bus. Nearly fell down when we got off. Mr. Paisley was upset, in case people thought he was drunk." She drew herself up proudly. "I helped him. He leaned on me, and I got him right to his door. 'Goodnight, Miss G., and don't forget, it's our little secret.' Couldn't take his hat off to me, I was carrying

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it, he felt too hot. Gave it back to him just before he shut the door. That's how I know where he lived." Another nod, QED to her own satisfaction.

Jill Tierce tried to pin down the date of that incident—the first poisoning? she wondered. Ironic, if James Paisley had spent his final span on earth concealing signs of his own downfall . . .

Marie was no good at dates. She wanted to talk about Paisley's kindness—which to an outsider seemed closer to benign indifference—while contrasting it to other approaches. "They're a miserable lot, down south. Where I come from, at least people pass the time of day. Here, nobody bothers with you. Where I lodge, they say I can sit with them of an evening. But they wait for me to go. As if I wanted to watch their rotten telly, drink their rotten coffee."

Another lonely one. Perhaps she should be introduced to Miss Brimble. Inspector Tierce started again, managing to locate Paisley's first attack—first, because Marie Gossard remembered him saying he'd always been fit as a fiddle, it must be a passing ailment—as occurring some nine months before his death. That tied in with the pathologist's theory.

But what did it mean, her precious discovery? Precious little, Jill Tierce decided, unlocking the door for Marie Gossard. She wasted a minute watching the girl lumber away into darkness. Paisley's solitary mourner, the only person who missed him. And he had hardly known she existed, except as a human machine, a rather erratic one. Inspector Tierce recalled her mother lamenting Miss Brimble's plight, reduced to talking to machines. That bright idea about studying Paisley's phone records had been futile: he kept no phone in the flat. She ought to have guessed. Who would ring him?

No phone, no TV set, no car. And he had paid for the flat. Could that be an unexplored avenue? Frugal lifestyle, so that even on a modest salary, he must have saved a fair amount. Talk to the lawyer again. Paisley's will, never altered, left everything to his wife. Six months ago it had appeared that Paisley's estate would go to the government. When the flat was sold, the proceeds plus his savings might be worth a death. Check in case a long lost relation had surfaced . . . She tossed her head disgustedly. Is that a funeral march, or the sound of a barrel being scraped?

On the positive side, she had

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been active all day, now it was nearly nine o'clock, and there wasn't a trace of complaint from her leg. Win some, lose some.

Next morning she woke to a possibility making her scalp tingle. She had to get into that flat again, quick, quick, quick.

Inspector Tierce set the two copies of *Country Wife* on Superintendent Bradd's desk. By now they were in transparent bags with an enlarged print of their front pages clipped to each. "Look at these lab photographs, sir. On this issue you can actually see the writing—hard pencil, very faint. The other one shows indentations from paper written on with the magazine as a backing. 'Tom Red's' is what it says. The woman in the newsagent's uses nicknames for her delivery kids. Tom Red has red hair, as you might expect. That slip of paper marked his morning bundle. Which he took out, putting the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* plus a copy of *Country Wife* through the letterbox at Marie Gossard's lodgings. On the other number of *Country Wife*, there's her name. It looks Chinese, but the woman who scribbled it is definite that it reads, 'M. Gossard, 23 Harvest Road.' She began by marking the magazine with name and address, and after a few months, just tucked it in with the rest of the papers for that house."

"I'm senior, not senile," Bradd pointed out. "I get the picture. But she could have lent these mags to Paisley. Doesn't place her in his dwelling, far less make her a viable suspect. Where's your motive?"

"Marie can explain it better than I can. Let me interview her again, here, after formal caution. You'll see."

Bradd studied her over his half-moon spectacles. "On what pretext would you pull her in, inspector?"

"She asked to speak to me yesterday. I want to clarify certain matters arising from that."

"Huh! Well, I suppose that flies, as they say. Give it a go."

Extracts from interview conducted, after caution, with Marie Raquel Gossard, of 23 Harvest Road, Baychester, Wessex. Interview commenced 11.28 A.M. *terminated 1.53* P.M. *on above date. Audio ref. WCF/AT/58401. RESTRICTED.*

Q: Marie, you visited Mr. Paisley's home on a number of occasions, didn't you?
A: Never went in. I knew where he lived, I told you that.

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Q: We have evidence that you were in that flat, certainly twice, probably several more times. You left things behind. You don't remember, but you did. I'm not tricking you. We can tell you were there.
A: Oh. Nothing happened. I'm not that sort. I have never been with a man, not that way. And he, he would never . . . It was just company. For me. He'd be asleep in the other room. Next door, like.

Q: Go back to when he was taken poorly. You remember, on the bus, and you helped him.
A: Yes, I did. I got Mr. Paisley to his door, the way I said. He went in. I was nearly back to the digs before I thought. Him on his own, and no supper. So I caught the bus back to town for the late shopping. I got soup and bread, my mum can keep that down when she's poorly. It must have been past seven when I got back to Mr. Paisley's. The door to his place isn't where the other flats-people go in. I couldn't have kept knocking and that, up where they are. They would have looked at me and wanted to know why I was there. But I did keep on, and the door swung open. He'd been too sick to notice, thought he shut it proper.

I went in and he was asleep. I made the soup and the toast. There was no bowl. I gave it him in a mug. He was ever so upset, me being there. But he was woozy as well, right poorly. Feverish. He drank the soup and a finger of toast, a toast soldier. I cut the bread that way. Mum says it's tempting for an invalid. Mr. Paisley kept saying I must go away. That was all right. He didn't mean it nasty. He thought they would say things about us.

I said I would, just wash the mug and the plate first. I promised. But he went back to sleep. Tossing and muttering, he was out of it. Nasty fever. Something he ate, most like. Else it was the flu. Might have been. That was a Friday, he came back Monday and looked all right.

That night I sat in the other room. It was cold, but I had my warm coat. He was in there asleep, and I was out there. I pretended I was like my mum. Looking after things. I had *Country Wife* in my coat pocket, I like where it's about birds and that, nature. I read for a bit but the light made him disturbed, and my hands was numb with cold. I switched the light off and sat there until ever so late. Hands in my pockets, for mitts. It was great. Happiest day of my life. Down south, anyway. The happiest since I was little, and Gramps was there.

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Q: When Mr. Paisley recovered, got better and was back at Nixon's, what did he say to you?
A: Nothing. He didn't want the firm knowing. On the bus home, night or two later, he thanked me. Said it was . . . embarrass . . . embarrassing. But thanks for the soup and taking the trouble and he hoped it hadn't spoilt my plans for the evening. He was like that. My plans for the evening. It wasn't sarky for him to say that. He let on to think, maybe he did think, that I had plans. Somebody wanting to see me. Mates and that.

Q: How long was it before he fell ill again?
A: He never. That was me.

Q: What does that mean, Marie?
A: I don't want to . . . all right. I got to wishing he could be ill again, not bad-ill, but poorly. He never did. 'Fit as a fiddle.' That's what he said. It was right, he was. I was wishing, all the same. I got to thinking.

Gramps loved his garden, and I helped. I know all the flowers. Gramps had this stuff in a bottle, you put a spoonful in a watering can and fill it up from the tap, right to the top. To spray the flowers, stop them getting eaten.

After Gramps passed on, this was when I was still living home, the garden went to jungle. The little 'uns, my brothers, tramped everything flat. Football, after the old feller couldn't stop them. I was in the shed a lot, pretending Gramps was there. Skip came in once. Skip is our dog. I saw him lick stuff off a shelf, like crystals, sugar. I never took much notice while he was licking. Skip nearly died. They called the vet and that, a big to-do. I knew it must have been the stuff on the shelf. I never said, in case it was my fault.

The stuff . . . the bottle with the bug-killer, it had fallen over and a bit leaked out and dried. Where Skip had licked. So I thought, that's dangerous, better put that away safe. And I did. Hid it in a tin on the shelf right at the back of the shed.

Q: Why didn't you flush it down the toilet, if it was so dangerous, Marie?
A: There was no call to throw Gramps's stuff away. I made it safe, didn't I?

Q: Tell us how Mr. Paisley got sick again.
A: I wished and wished he would. When I went home to Newcastle at Christmas . . . I slipped to the shed, Christmas night, got the bottle and hid it.

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Brought it here. It was easy to try it on him. I had this teaspoon, I dipped it in the bottle, it was more of a jar. Screw-top jar . . . I stirred his tea with it, that's all. Nobody noticed.

Q: Where is that jar now?
A: I threw it in the sea.

Q: Because you knew you had done wrong.
A: No! With him gone, there was no use for it. I couldn't take it home, they keep their motorbikes in the shed now. So I made it safe in the sea.

Q: How many times did you poison Mr. Paisley's tea, Marie?
A: (No response.)

Q: (Repetition of above.)
A: Six, seven . . . I never counted. Only wanted him a little bit ill. Only dipped the spoon in the stuff. Wetted it. The stuff was nearly solid. Treacly. How could that . . . do so much to him? We got off the bus same as ever, first time I tried. It didn't seem to work. Then, between one step and the next, he started holding his tummy. I helped him home again. Soup in my bag, ready. I could stay longer, with no shopping to do.

Q: Did he never suspect?
A: I don't get you.

Q: He only had these attacks when you were there. Did he never make a connection?
A: We worked at the same place, always got the same bus home. Why would he think anything bad? I only wanted to be there. He knew I was glad to help. You got no right to say suspect. They were happy times, the happiest.

Q: Not for Mr. Paisley.
A: He always got over it by morning. Never off work. That's how I knew I was using just enough. Mr. Paisley didn't take it too serious. It was a nuisance, he said, tummy bug. Doctors was nosy, fussed too much. He could sweat it out. Off to bed with him. He'd be weak, and the belly cramps. I never poisoned him, not to say . . . poisoned. Just a dip of the spoon, and only once a month, or could have been five, six weeks. I didn't, you know, fix dates. Just when it got too lonely and I needed to be there, like a mum.

Cosy, was that. My own place, just for an evening. I generally stayed as long as I dared, they shut the door where I lodge, midnight. I'd run for my life. Easy to forget things, leave them behind.

I'd finished with those mags,

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anyway. Read them over and over.

Statement extracts end.

"Gossard will be going to a secure establishment for the mentally ill," said the deputy chief constable some days later. "Outstanding performance, inspector."

Superintendent Bradd chimed in, "Seconded, Jill." He was sincere. "What gets me, why did she come to you in the first place?"

"Marie looked up to poor Paisley. I can't get inside her head, but . . . she only wanted him ill, therefore it didn't count. She felt guiltless. When she heard I was conducting further inquiries, Marie wanted to stand up for him, assure me he was . . . er, valuable, not a nonentity. Only she let slip more than she'd planned—kept talking to keep my attention, no doubt. She wasn't used to interesting anyone. Loneliness. It all comes back to that."

Remembering something, she added, "Sergeant Ranulph deserves credit, sir. He turned up those magazines the wretched girl left behind." Self-serving, she reproached herself, not as generous as it must seem. These men liked women to be gracious in victory.

Hollow victory: James Paisley dead as ever, and a deranged girl sent into captivity. Marie would never have harmed another fellow being, so where was the gain? What makes you so sure she wouldn't get lethally lonely again? jeered the skeptic at the back of her mind. Well, yes, there was that.

On the way back along the corridor from the deputy chief's office, Bradd said, "I was looking for the wrong motive—not hate but love."

"Marie didn't love Paisley," Inspector Tierce disagreed. "She wanted to be needed, if only a few times a year. That, and the sensation of being in her own home, behind her own front door, 'like my mum.' "

At the end of the corridor a large window faced the bus station, the far side of the square. It was the rush hour, people pouring in. Too far away to distinguish faces.

Jill Tierce let Superintendent Bradd go on ahead. Forehead to the glass, she was rapt. How many of those figures, shoulder to shoulder, remained isolated from the rest? There was a song about all the lonely people. She hoped there were no more Marie Gossards among them.

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UNSOLVED
by Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the March issue.

Yesterday afternoon, the quiet town of Newton was victimized by a bold and rash ring of young car thieves. Five cars were stolen from Newton residents, each from a different street or avenue and by a different thief. Each person whose car was stolen had a car that in one way or another suggested his occupation. For example, a stevedore may drive a "car"go. The first part of the puzzle requires that you figure out what type of "car" suggests which occupation. The victims were an illustrator, a florist, a barker, a dietitian, and a naturalist. *Note: The clues to the five cars below correspond to the order in which they were stolen.*

After completing the first part, take that information and proceed to Part II. Can you figure out who stole whose car from which street or avenue, the owner of each car, and the occupation of each owner? Remember to remember what you learned in Part I.

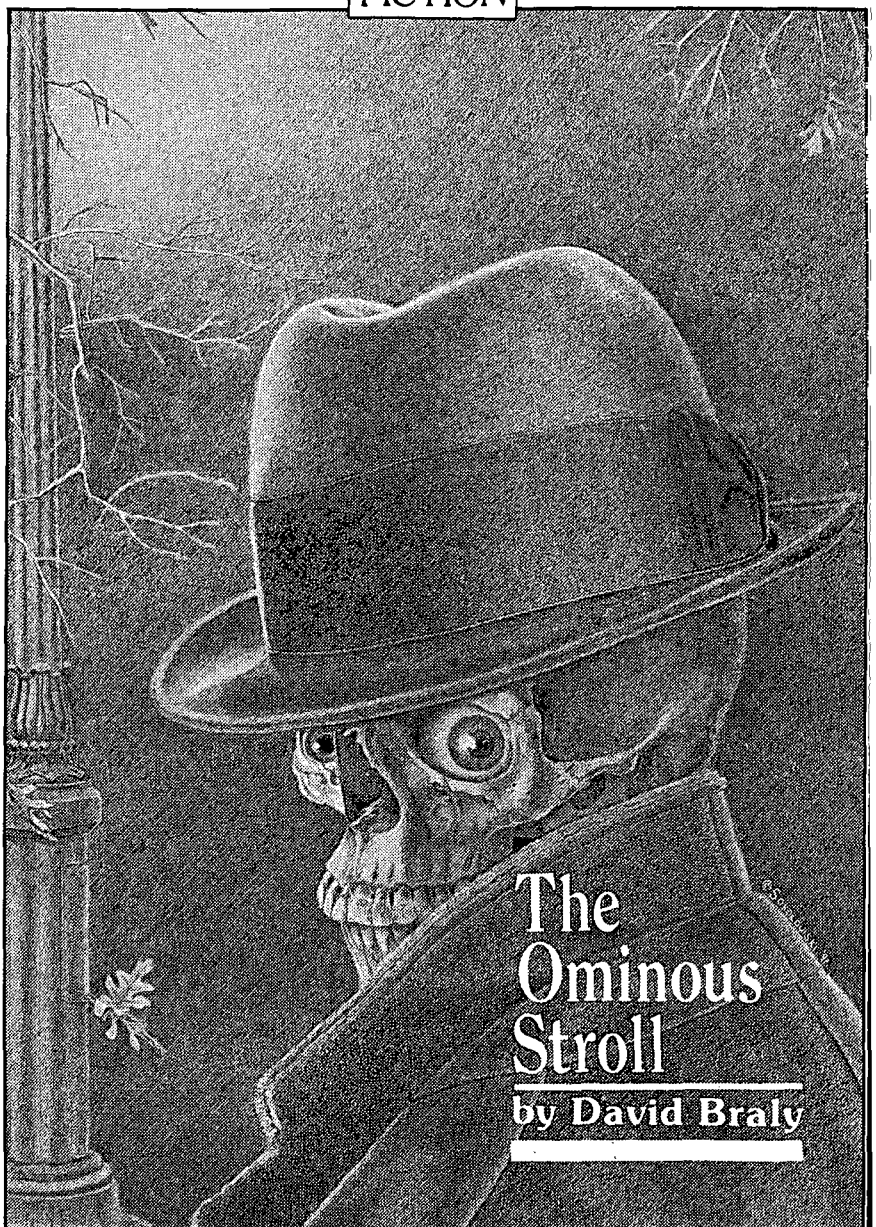
Part I: (1) — — — — A — I — N (2) — — — D — N — L
(3) — — — B — — Y — — — — T — (4) — — — N I — A —
(5) — — — T — O N

Part II:

1. The florist's car was not stolen by Woody, who did not steal the car on Main Street, either.
2. The avenue where Sheppard stole a car was not First Avenue, and it was not Daisy's car he stole.
3. Forrest's car was stolen by a thief who was not Buddy sometime before the dietitian's car was stolen from the street in front of his clinic.
4. The theft of Bob's car from a busy avenue was sandwiched between Slim Jim's heist and the theft of Arthur's new car.
5. Though the naturalist's car was stolen earlier, that car and Calvin's car were stolen from downtown streets.
6. The car on Third Avenue was stolen after the car on Fourth Street but directly before the car Drew stole.
7. The car on Fifth Avenue was stolen immediately after the barker (who was not Arthur) had his car stolen.

See page 149 for the solution to the January puzzle.

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The Ominous Stroll

by David Braly

Illustration by Ted Sokolowski

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I had been a member of the New York police department for barely a year that bleak, cold, windy autumn day in 1954 when I began the events I am about to relate. Had I reported them earlier, there would have been two results, both undesirable. First, I would have been fired. Second, I would have been disbelieved by everyone except those very superiors who were discharging me. The first result is no longer possible because I retired from the force last month. And as for that second concern, I may still be disbelieved, although I think that a man who has maintained an unblemished record while rising through the ranks to become a precinct captain before retirement stands a better chance of being taken seriously than a twenty-four-year-old rookie street cop, but in any case I no longer much care. I have seen public opinion swayed too often by rogues and scoundrels to care much about that opinion, although I do believe that the public should be aware of those threats to its welfare that we who are charged with its protection happen by accident or design to discover. I will lay out the facts of this matter, completely and honestly. Whether or not I am believed is up to each person who reads this little memoir, searching his or her own heart and mind.

As I stated above, it began on a cold, windy, gray autumn day in 1954. I am uncertain of the exact date, except that it was in late October or early November. I do remember that election posters were plastered everywhere. At that time I was a rookie street patrolman, but a special assignment had placed me on temporary duty with an undercover investigation team led by Detective Lieutenant Charles Roland. Roland and his partners, Sergeants Will Gruger and Howard Nixon, were plainclothes, while I and the other patrolmen assigned to assist in their investigation were normally in uniform but for this assignment were plainclothed. Although Roland reported to Detective Captain Oscar Wertz, Roland headed the investigation.

Not many people today remember Charles Roland. Even in the department, he has been forgotten. That is a shame because Charles Roland was one of the truly great New York police detectives. About six two, weighing probably one ninety, he was a broad-shouldered, sloe-eyed man with a Roman nose and a wide, never smiling mouth. Although then—in my twenties—I thought of Roland as an old man, especially because he had the whitest hair of any person I had ever seen, at that time he was probably in his early fifties. Roland had enjoyed a spectacular rise up the ranks,

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hardly surprising considering his success in apprehending criminals of every sort. Roland was a cop's cop. In his own time, he was widely known and just as widely respected, not less by those who knew him intimately through day to day contact than by those who merely read about his exploits, which were carefully covered by the *Mirror* and other tabloids of the day. Certainly it was a privilege for a rookie like myself to be assigned to assist him, a fact I was fully aware of at the time.

Our target was a numbers gang that Roland believed was merely the subsidiary of a gambling operation being run by one of the big New York crime families. Today it is difficult for people to get very excited about a gambling racket. Drugs are the big problem today. Drugs and everything associated with them, from muggings and burglaries to murders and gang wars for turf. But that was not the case in 1954. In that long ago, more innocent time, drug dealers were the most heinous criminals on the street and when we caught one we beat up on him good before locking him away for many years, but they were rare birds and the problem they caused was a minor one even in the slums where their activities were confined. We had the liberty to be outraged at other crimes, to attack other felons. Numbers runners were among our targets. Gambling kingpins, who oversaw the numbers rackets from a distance, were especially targeted by us, because we knew that most of them were involved in other organized criminal activities as well. This particular numbers gang operated out of a small, boarded-up old red brick building near the East River, the former domicile of an insurance agency that actually had been a protection racket. Roland put the building under twenty-four hour surveillance. Although we could have burst in there at any time and arrested at least a half dozen lowlifes who frequented the place, it might eventually lead us to the actual man in charge, the boss, who would undoubtedly be a member of what in those days we called "the syndicate."

We watched. Roland and two officers conducted the surveillance from noon until midnight, the sort of weary, grueling stint that had earned Roland his fame, his promotions, and his drawer full of medals. Nixon and one officer had the six A.M. to noon shift, Gruger and myself the midnight to six A.M. shift. Unbalanced as this schedule might sound, it worked. For four days we watched that dreary little red building. Gruger and I left the station at eleven forty each night and drove to our position by eleven fifty-

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five; Roland's car departed a few minutes past midnight. Gruger and I were in a 1954 unmarked Ford radio car, cold as the Arctic because the only way the heater would work was if the motor was on, and naturally we could not sit there all night with the engine idling. Occasionally, when the cold became unbearable, we turned on the motor and then the heater for ten or fifteen minutes, but usually we just remained there, shivering, our feet and legs covered by an old army blanket. Sergeant Gruger, a hatchet-faced, salt-and-pepper-haired man in his mid-forties, would often—and without warning—release a hot stream of verbal invective against the weather and the underworld, which would warm up the air around us, but that was fleeting.

As I said, we watched the building for four days, but we received other instructions before the start of our fifth stint. When, as was my habit, I went to the detective division at eleven thirty to meet Gruger, I discovered him in conversation with Mendelson, one of the patrolmen on Roland's surveillance team. They broke off their talk when they noticed me, waiting in silence until I reached them.

"What's going on?" I asked them.

"There's been a break in the case—we hope," said Mendelson. "A man went into the numbers building early this morning who aroused Sergeant Nixon's suspicion. Nixon decided that the man warranted a gamble, so he broke off surveillance of the building in order to shadow the suspect. Lieutenant Roland confirmed his decision by radio, organized another surveillance team, and put that team outside the building to replace Nixon. Nixon and Officer McLean tailed the suspect until noon, at which time Roland and us took over. We've been following him since noon."

"And we'll take over the tail at midnight instead of going to the numbers building," I guessed.

Mendelson nodded.

"Tell him the strange part," Gruger said to Mendelson.

Mendelson complied: "This man . . . well, he hasn't stopped walking."

"From when?" I asked.

"From the time Nixon began tailing him—which I understand was approximately eight o'clock this morning—until I left Roland at eleven. That's fifteen hours. He goes from place to place, from building to building and street to street, always afoot, never by taxi or bus or subway, and none of us have yet seen him sit down. He's seldom stood still for more than a minute."

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"He sounds like an energetic worker," was my only comment.

"Believe me, it's more than that. Just wait until you see him for yourself. You'll see exactly what I mean."

I glanced at Gruger. The sergeant's eyes betrayed his amusement at Mendelson's unease, the way a veteran often finds humor in the discomfort of a rookie at something the older man has come to accept as the way of things.

We drove to where Roland now shadowed the suspect, as relayed to us from his radio car to ours. On the way to that area—147th Street and Eighth Avenue, south of the Harlem River in Upper Manhattan—Gruger explained how we would tail the man after we relieved Roland. From midnight until three o'clock, I would walk while Gruger would follow at some distance in the unmarked radio car; at three o'clock, we would exchange positions. I wondered aloud how I would be able to stay close enough to a stranger on a dark, empty street to keep him under observation while at the same time remaining unobserved. Gruger said to "just do the best you can," advice that is as excellent as it is pointless.

Upon spotting the other radio car, Gruger pulled over to the curb behind it and parked. I slid out and walked up to the other car. The officer inside nodded to me, then pointed at something a half block ahead of us, which I immediately recognized in the illumination of a street light as Lieutenant Roland. He stood in front of a furniture store, hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat and hat pulled low over his forehead, studying something across the street. I saw no one where he was looking. I hurriedly crossed the street and walked briskly toward him. Roland turned when he first heard my approach but, upon determining by a glance who I was, immediately resumed staring at whatever he had been viewing before. From this side of the street I could see what it was: the big window of a bar, through which a dozen or more patrons were clearly visible.

"Is he in there?" I asked when I drew abreast of Roland, immediately regretting having uttered such an unnecessary inquiry.

"Yes. I'll remain and point him out to you, then he's your baby. He's an odd one. No matter how long we tail him, no matter how deserted the street, he never notices us, or so he makes it appear. Not once has he turned and looked around. It's almost as if he knew that—here he comes."

A man had stepped out of the bar and turned south, walking down the empty sidewalk with a steady, slow, even pace, similar

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to the melancholy pace of honorary pallbearers keeping up with a coffin being carried wearily to an open grave. In the night I could not see his features, except that he was tall and lean and was dressed in a dark fedora and a knee-length dark overcoat. I stayed well back from him, relying upon the street lights and the emptiness of the streets to help keep me informed of his whereabouts. Often the only motor I could hear was that of the radio car, keeping behind me by one to three blocks. I quickly became aware that the man I was following walked without any discernible purpose, usually heading south but often east, west, or north, and twice completing great circles that encompassed several blocks. Twice he entered bars, each time remaining inside only three or four minutes before walking out again.

The second time he entered a bar I decided to attempt a look at him. This was not idle curiosity. Not knowing the facial appearance of a man you are tailing is more than a mere inconvenience; it is an actual danger. He could go into a crowd, turn around, and walk directly toward me, with me ignorant of who it was who approached. That being the state of my thoughts on the matter, I approached the bar's front window and peered inside, yet kept far enough back from the window that people inside would not, I hoped, be able to distinguish my own features. I spotted him immediately. He faced the bar, his back to me, but that face was clearly reflected in the long mirror behind the bar cabinet. It was a long, drawn, deeply-lined face, dark and grim and somehow forbidding, the cold black eyes wedged beneath enormous shaggy eyebrows and a long, straight nose drooping over his upper lip like a frozen raindrop. Huge, twisted, hairy ears hung out from his thin head, which was topped by red and brown hair beneath his brown fedora and which terminated in a clean-shaven, jutting jaw. The half dozen bar patrons gave this stranger nervous sideways glances, while the barkeeper held the mug at arm's length when he presented him with his beer. At that moment the strange man's eyes darted to the mirror, and I jumped back out of the light from the window. Had he seen me? I couldn't be sure. I couldn't even guess. But my heart pounded wildly, and even the cutting cold of that damp, miserable autumn night could not chill the panic fever that rose up and pervaded my body.

Minutes later he reemerged onto the sidewalk, showing neither by pace nor glance the slightest interest in me or knowledge of my presence. A half hour later it was time for Gruger to take over the

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foot shadowing, while I moved behind the wheel of the Ford. How warm it was inside that wonderful car! For the next three hours I continued to drive as Gruger had driven, keeping one to three blocks behind the sergeant at all times. Nothing spectacular happened. The stranger continued to walk, stopping only twice, once to stare through the window of a small jewelry store for ten minutes and later to circle around and around an intersection for half an hour, lefthandwise, which was undoubtedly the most unusual of all the unusual things he had done, and which made us both wonder if the man was simply insane. At six o'clock, Nixon, his partner, and a newly assigned team member took over. By that time, our three teams had been following the suspect for a total of twenty-two hours and he was still walking, now near 126th and Lenox.

Nixon and his two men followed the suspect until noon, when Roland took over. At midnight, Gruger, myself, and Officer Jim Fussell took over from Roland near the north boundary of Central Park. Roland informed us at that time that the suspect had never stopped walking for more than two minutes, had not eaten or used a bathroom or sat down in the entire time we had been following him.

It fell to me to tail this eerie fellow through Central Park. Nor did the presence of a gun under my coat greatly relieve my anxiety that night as I followed him past shadow-casting trees and bushes and worse, through total darkness on those occasions when the moon was hidden by the clouds. Gruger and Fussell were far behind me, safely warm in the radio car, and I believe that the stranger and myself had the entire north end of Central Park all to ourselves. When the suspect reached the reservoir, he paused for several minutes, then turned abruptly east. We came out on Fifth Avenue near 96th Street. For a long time I continued to shadow him in solitude. What I didn't know was that Gruger had radioed for help the moment I disappeared into the park and that patrol cars were now searching every side of the park for us. Eventually we were spotted and our location radioed to Gruger. Soon the sergeant caught up with me and we exchanged places.

Not until the next evening, while Roland was completing his third stint following that tireless walker, did I have occasion to come upon another remarkable fact about our quarry. I regret to say that at the time the discovery I made struck me as nothing more significant than a coincidence, although as a police officer I

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had no business believing in coincidences. But I was a young police officer, and anyway can affirm with truth and personal knowledge that there are really such things as coincidences. What I believed to be a coincidence that miserable autumn night in 1954 was a multiple-fatality traffic accident. A hardware truck had jumped a stop sign, plowing into a passenger car carrying four people. The truck driver escaped without a scratch, but two men and a woman in the automobile were killed and the other woman badly injured. I read about the accident in the *World-Telegram & Sun,* noticed that it was the same intersection that our suspect had repeatedly circled, and gave the matter no further thought.

Years passed before my mind linked together the suspect's circling of the intersection and the fatal accident. When the link came, it came suddenly, while I was seated over hot cinnamon rolls and coffee one morning at the breakfast table. At first I tried to reject the idea that the two events could be connected by anything other than time and place. But once the thought had come, it refused to leave. For days it nagged me. Finally, realizing that I must humor this insanity or truly go insane, I decided to investigate the possibility that bad events had occurred at the other places that were associated in my mind with the dark stranger. Unfortunately, my determination exceeded my resources. I could not remember—after the passage of several years—the names of those bars wherein the walker paused to lift a mug, nor the jewelry store through whose window he stared. I learned only one new fact: two nights after the accident at the circled intersection, there had occurred elsewhere in the city a particularly gruesome murder. While it would produce only a few inches in a tabloid today, in 1954 such murders were still a novelty, and upon discovering it in my search of the police archives I wondered that I had not paid more attention to it at the time, for surely it must have received wide coverage in all the newspapers and on local radio. Yet I must have paid scant attention, for I have no recollection of it now. My only explanation for this lapse is that my weariness at shadowing the walker on those dismal autumn nights, when the cold air drained the energy right out of me, had left me too numb-minded to pay attention to anything other than the job before me. The grim details of the murder it is unnecessary to relate. Suffice it to say, a young man and his girlfriend were murdered by someone wielding an axe, in Central Park. I will add that the crime was committed at the north end of the reservoir, exactly at the spot

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where our suspect had turned sharply east.

All of this knowledge, of course, lay waiting for discovery, but was not found until years later. I regret deeply that I failed to make the connection at the time when the murders were all the talk of the city, but I really doubt that it would have made the slightest difference in the outcome of our labors.

Nor did it require a connection to these terrible deaths for us to conclude that the man—or whatever—whom we followed was not a normal human being. A week of tailing him in shifts had left us all tired, edgy, and irritable, while there had been no noticeable effect upon the stranger himself, who had not slept, eaten, answered the call of nature, sat down, changed clothes, or even paused more than a few minutes out of each day in all those days. The eeriness of his behavior caused each one of us to unwillingly, subconsciously search our memories for all those stories we had absorbed in childhood, those stories we had listened to, shivered to, and, upon reaching our mature years, rejected with a shrug and a laugh: night tales of demons, ghouls, ghosts, and creatures of other worlds who walked among us on nefarious missions. In the cold, dim light of the autumn days, following our suspect was uncomfortable, but those of us who tailed him at night became as jumpy as small children walking past a rural graveyard on Halloween.

I am at a loss to explain what happened next, or even to claim that anything unnatural—that is to say, supernatural—did happen. After all, Gruger and I had been following this man for each of eight nights, and Fussell for almost as long. In all that time the suspect had never turned to face us. But towards the end of that eighth shift, while Fussell tailed him afoot on the sidewalk that ran down Vandam near the intersection with Sixth, and while Gruger and I were parked a block behind Fussell with our motor and heater running, we saw by a street light the stranger turn and stare directly at Jim Fussell. Fussell, a rookie a year younger than myself, stopped. The stranger turned around again and resumed his former pace, but Fussell remained as motionless as a statue.

"Something's happened," exclaimed Gruger. "Jim's frozen up. Get out there and don't lose that sonofabitch. Not now!"

I leapt out of the car and hurried toward Fussell and the now distant stranger. When I reached Fussell, I shot a quick "Are you all right?" and he nodded, although without enthusiasm. He remained where he was, a shaken man, as pale as the moon.

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Soon I was following the suspect at the usual distance. Nothing else odd happened that shift.

Later, when Gruger and I questioned Fussell about what had happened, he said that he could offer us no explanation of his strange behavior. I have since then heard crime victims relate how, upon being confronted by a great threat of violence or actual violence or some other trauma, they had suffered an immediate energy drain, one that sucked out their energy in seconds the way the piercing cold of those autumn nights sucked out my energy over a period of several hours. What Fussell said to us about his own inability to respond after the suspect looked at him sounded similar to those accounts that I have heard since then. Whether it was the same thing or not, I don't know.

Two days later Jim Fussell died of a heart attack. To say that his sudden death was unexpected would be a gross understatement. He had been in the prime of his life and had undergone and passed a complete physical examination only two months earlier. At the time, of course, Gruger and I suspected that his unusual reaction to the suspect's turning to look at him had been the first evidence of his deteriorating health, and we condemned ourselves for failing to spot it for the signal that it was. Not until years later, after I had made the mental connection between the stranger's behavior and the intersection accident, did it occur to me that, instead of Fussell's freezing signaling his impending heart attack, the stare might have in some inexplicable manner provoked the healthy heart to fail. But our earlier theory, and my later one, are both mere guesses.

The story of this case does not have as dramatic a conclusion.

After our spooky suspect left Vandam, he headed east, and, after two more days of wild and generally directionless strolling, he started down Delancey. But what a difference! Instead of appearing to wander around aimlessly, as he had done without fail from the first hour of our tail, his course on Delancey was straight and true, with no turns to the left or to the right. He was headed east. Roland became convinced that the suspect would go over the Williamsburg Bridge into Brooklyn, whereupon our authority to tail him would be gone. Perhaps, speculated Roland, that was the suspect's own thought, for surely he had been long aware of our quiet pursuit. This led to a debate between Roland, who wanted to notify the Brooklyn authorities, and Gruger and Nixon, who, tired to the bone of this case, preferred to drag the suspect down to the nearest

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precinct house and grill him. The three detectives went to Captain Wertz for a decision. It was the first time that Wertz learned the full magnitude of the shadowing—it now involved the three detectives, six patrolmen in plainclothes, four other patrolmen in plainclothes on standby, and a detective with two patrolmen still watching the little red brick building where the chase had begun—and the eerie nature of the man who was its focus. Clearly it was no longer a question of tracking a numbers racket from a gambling dive to a member of a big crime family. It was something more sinister than that, although no one was sure exactly what.

When I reported for duty the following night, Gruger informed me that our investigation had been canceled. This development was as welcome, initially, as it was unexpected, and I fear I could not conceal my pleasure at finally being liberated from the long, boring, physically exhausting tail.

"Just tell me one thing," I said. "Why did Roland cancel it?"

"He didn't. No one was even considering canceling it, only whether to turn it over to Brooklyn or haul in the suspect. But Captain Wertz wanted to see this man we'd been tailing for two weeks, so this morning Charles—I mean Lieutenant Roland—drove him over for a look. The man didn't cross the bridge, by the way; he turned north just before he reached the East River . . . anyway, Wertz got a peep at him."

I waited for Gruger to continue, until it became obvious that he would require some of that unnecessary prompting that certain types of people do require on occasion. "And what happened?" I asked.

"According to Charles, Wertz took one look at the guy, turned white as a bedsheet, then turned to Charles and asked, 'You've been tailing *him?*' When Charles—Lieutenant Roland—said that we had, Mertz mumbled something about Jim Fussell, then ordered Charles to cancel the tail immediately. No explanation."

"None?"

Gruger shook his head. "Lieutenant Roland tried to argue, but Wertz would have none of it. Furthermore, Wertz said that if any of us ever mentioned anything that had happened, the department would deny everything and fire the man who talked."

I whistled in awe at the vehemence of these orders. "It must have something to do with a secret project of the federal government," I said.

"Yeah . . . or graft."

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To the best of my ability to remember what happened, and to commit it to paper, that is the story.

Not quite the whole story, of course. That mental connection I finally made between the suspect's circling of the intersection and the later accident came one morning after I had begun thinking of the suspect again. An intermission of several years had separated the tail and the memory. Being a rookie when the tail occurred, I did not at the time fully appreciate how utterly strange the whole affair was, but my later experience with the dull and boring routine of police work educated me to the truth. What started me thinking about it was that I had seen a man who was identical to our suspect—indeed, to this very day I suspect it might have been he—strolling down Vanderbilt at Grand Central Terminal. I have seen him, or someone identical to him in every respect, on several later occasions since that sighting. In the early sixties, I saw such a creature walking through DeWitt Clinton Park; in the late seventies, I saw him on East 62nd Street; and in 1985, on Carmine Street.

Indeed, my decision to write this short memoir of this most unusual case was inspired by yet another sighting, this time on Lexington Avenue. Perhaps it is an entirely different man—the fact that this man is the same age and wears identical clothes to those of that eerie creature of 1954 argues for this view—but perhaps not. I will risk the denials of the department, which institution at least can no longer terminate me, and hope that some of the other young patrolmen who were called in to assist the detectives on the case will come forward and confirm what I have herein reported. The detectives themselves are all dead now, and carried with them into their graves this grim secret.

Perhaps Gruger and I were right that night when we speculated that the man was part of some sort of secret government project. More likely, though, Wertz, with his greater years and experience, realized that a group of otherwise intelligent New York cops had in perfect ignorance taken it upon themselves to shadow a demon.

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The Education of the Kamo Virgin



by Ann F. Woodward

Thief and virgin priestess are extremes of names. Yet she bore both at the same time, one dazzlingly public, one never so much as whispered in strict privacy. In the end she abandoned both, to be called The Captain's Princess, a name combining the comfortable and the exalted.

They had known she would be beautiful, it was what everyone always said about her. How, after the former Virgin, who had been appointed reign after reign and had grown old in the office, it was such a restoration to see a young woman coming and going from the mansion at Murasakino. How the young men leapt to bare themselves in loincloths and carry her litter at festival time, how they waited piously around her gates to catch a glimpse of her sleeves hung out under the blinds of the carriage and to try to touch them. They themselves had seen how she smiled ever so

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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slightly, her face white as porcelain, during the great festival two weeks ago, a smile of unearthly knowledge, people said. Beautiful as a goddess, was how this Kamo Virgin was always described.

But they had not been prepared for such presence. The day she arrived at the minister's house, the princess sent Lady Aoi and Lady Omi, the most mature of her women, to greet her and accompany her to the apartment where she was to stay during this transition period. For the Virgin had given up her position and was to enter ordinary life again. But her private residence had burned, and her father, the emperor, was ill, and the minister had been asked to take her in. There were hints that a certain gentleman would call.

Standing in the covered gallery of the east wing, Aoi and Lady Omi saw the carriage stop before the gate. They waited while the ox was unhitched in the street and the carriage pulled by the traces across the courtyard until it could be set flush with the floor of the dismounting porch. The blind was rolled up from inside, and the Virgin stepped out. She still wore the white robes of her office, her short coat was of scarlet silk decorated with panels of embroidered leaves of the sacred sakaki tree. When she was emerged, a lady-in-waiting coming behind her to adjust the fall of her skirts, they saw that she was tall and full in her body. Her hair, unbound, fell in a breathtaking stream of lively shining black to sweep the floor beyond her hems. Like a high cloud before the unseen winds of heaven, she moved ahead of them toward the opposite wing, a servant girl showing the way, bowing and almost overwhelmed with respect.

During the passage through the house, Lady Omi kept up a flow of polite inquiries about the Virgin's present well-being and modest comments on the uncertainty of the weather of this cloudy day. She passed on the minister's assurances that the most respected Virgin was welcome in his house and should make it her own, and requests from his daughter the princess to visit her after she had rested for a while. The Virgin moved in a slow, floating fashion, her face benign but abstracted, as if some inner voice spoke to her and she could not divide her attention. She did not speak at all.

The rooms she was to occupy had been rigorously cleaned and completely refurnished. Spring air breathed through the narrow-stripped bamboo blind, stirring the curtains of the sleeping platform. The princess herself had propped iris in a tall vase and had chosen the four little girls who were to mediate between this apart-

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ment and the house and who knelt, frightened and shy, in their dresses of leaf green all alike. Even personal articles were provided—a lacquered box full of fine paper, another fitted with an inkstone and brushes. In the drawers of a small stand were pots of makeup, combs, hair ornaments, ribbons, sashes, perfume censers, and lotions. On a small cushion of brightest royal scarlet was a round mirror in its case that the emperor had sent. Beyond this large room were two smaller ones where her ladies would stay. They could be heard in the distance, having arrived in following carriages.

Aoi, after initial greetings and introductions, had not spoken. Lady Omi was a little nervous and she had been voluble and gracious enough for both of them, so Aoi merely observed. Arriving with a flurry of skirts, the Virgin's women surrounded her, and the princess's two ladies, not needed for the settling in, departed. For some time afterward various commotions of arrival could be heard.

"She will surprise you, I think," Aoi said to the princess. "She is a rather silent person."

"But very modest," said Lady Omi, "and quite agreeable."

Since these qualities were all that Lady Omi required of anyone, the princess turned to Aoi and asked her to explain her comment. "You will see," was all Aoi said. And then, as was their custom, she put intuition into an oblique poem.

"From afar the clouds
Are purest white, with edges.
But when descended,
How they do confuse our sight!
A cloud from within is mist."

The princess answered her,

"Not trying to guess
Its shape, let us bask in mist,
Sweet essence of cloud
And necessary blessing
To all that grows and flowers."

They waited until they thought she could have rested and then sent a maid to ask if the Virgin would accompany her to call on

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the princess. But the maid came back to say that the Virgin's women would not allow the little girls to accept a message from a mere maid. Lady Omi, flushed and upset, went herself to give the invitation. The relayed reply was that they had not yet been given any food and that the honorable Virgin would see the princess after she had restored herself with a meal. The princess ordered trays for all of them, though she knew that an elaborate dinner was being prepared in the kitchen and would not be ready for another two hours. When the minister returned home, the Virgin still had not made an appearance.

"But my dear," he said to his daughter, "she expects you to go to her."

"In the house of my own father?"

"Be a little tolerant," said the minister. "She was so honored and petted these last five years that she imagines herself the center of the universe. Just a few weeks ago she was carried to the shrine by throngs of adoring men, escorted by the highest nobility, greeted and cheered by the whole city and most of the countryside. The emperor himself seldom receives the enthusiasm given the Kamo Virgin at the time of the Festival of the Two-Leaved Flower."

The princess dropped her head and fussed with the edges of her sleeves, where the several colors of her layered robes showed. She was wearing a cool spring combination of willow and jasmine that did not really become her, though the fabrics themselves, patterned and plain, sheer and solid silks, could not have been more beautiful. "You are always urging me to tolerance, Father, but it is not one of my talents."

The ruling effort of the princess's life was her struggle to win satisfying attention from the prince, her husband. He had chosen her for his principal wife when they were both young and had courted her ardently. But since then he had taken other wives and there were always brief connections with young women of the palace or the daughters of lesser officials, and the princess could not master her jealousy or her display of it, though most of the time she kept strict control of her emotions. She had a house of her own and preferred to live there so as not to let her father see her humiliations, but he had asked her to come with her women and help him entertain the Virgin during her stay.

The minister, because he too expected to greet their guest, had not yet changed from his court clothes, and even the princess was a little subdued by his magnificence. Chidings from a father so

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weighted with official authority could not be entirely ignored. If he had removed his outer coat of satin brocade and his train, loosened his belts and assumed the air of a countryman at home, as he usually did, she could have persisted in her rights as wife of a brother of the emperor, now outranking the former Virgin. But she merely bowed, though with slight mockery and still with a firm set of her lower lip, and beckoned to Lady Omi. "Please go to our honored guest," slight emphasis here, "and ask when we may have the humble pleasure of calling on her," and she glanced at her father to see if he appreciated her extreme politeness.

The minister would not subvert the seriousness of his intentions to ease the Virgin into a lesser position, and he turned to Aoi. "She will not have a happy time of it if she marries this man as we expect. He is a well-born person, but his life is modest. What attracted her to him, I wonder?"

"He served her while she was in training, and I imagine that, in her sudden isolation . . . " said Aoi.

Young daughters of the emperor who were appointed Kamo Virgin lived for three years in a special part of the palace, learning the rituals of Shinto service, abandoning all association with Buddhism, and kept in strict purity. In this Virgin's case, a Captain of the Guards had been in charge of her household. Later, when she moved to the Palace in the Fields at Murasakino and entered her official duties, this same captain had become Imperial Messenger, the one who carried the emperor's communications with the gods. There had never been any talk of an improper relationship between the captain and the Virgin, but the minister had been told privately that the reason the priestess was leaving her office was that she would marry the Messenger. It was true that the Virgin had no home to go to and that her father suffered from an eye disease. But the real reason she had come to the minister's house, Aoi thought, was that the three secret overnight visits that constituted marriage could be more discreetly managed here than in the rather public atmosphere of an official residence. A less obvious aspect of the arrangement was that, if the marriage did not go well, blame could be given to the minister by accusing him of lack of judgment in allowing a man of such low rank to have access to his visitor.

Asked to come just before darkness, the princess and her women made a long procession through the halls and galleries. The minister, without ceremony, had stopped by the guest apartment and passed in a brief note of greeting, initiating the Virgin's adjust-

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ment by his lack of formality. Aoi thought that he had made his daughter bend more for her own instruction than to please their guest.

The dividing screens that had created two rooms for the Virgin's women had been removed, making one enormous room. Though there was a great bustle of ladies-in-waiting, and though the little girls in green flew here and there with nervous seriousness, the Virgin was invisible. She had concealed herself within the sheer draperies of the platform, which was used for daytime sitting but was never completely closed off except when it was time to sleep. Through the outside curtains, the frames of standing curtains could be seen. The princess was offered a cushion outside the platform and was forced to address the Virgin from a lower position and through these several layers of hangings. Aoi saw that she had to suppress rebellion before she spoke.

"It is with sincere pleasure that I welcome you to my father's house. We hope no comfort has been neglected." Saying this and proud of the arrangements she had made, the princess looked around the room. All the articles she had chosen—the boxes, the dressing stand, the new cushions of dark violet, even the curtain-stands with their Chinese silk hangings and ribbons of green satin—were crammed into a corner in the back of the room, spilling out from behind a small screen. Replacing them were similar articles belonging to the Virgin, all antiques and not the fine new modern things the princess preferred. Even the vase of iris was gone, in its place a bronze vessel holding a single branch of the sakaki tree. Aoi had never seen the princess, skilled as she was in iron control, struggle so hard to master her feelings.

The Virgin was speaking. Her voice was low and had a concentrated quality that carried perfectly through the layers of hangings. "I had nowhere to go when I left my mansion, since illness has polluted my father's home. This is certainly better than I expected."

Aoi felt a prick of amusement and interest. She and the other ladies had regarded service to a former Kamo Virgin as an honor but, because of her eminence, something of a trial, to be borne but not enjoyed. Yet such blatant rudeness was beyond imagining, and Aoi thought that the visit would not be dull. The minister, the princess's father, was Great Minister of the Right, second in the government only to the Great Minister of the Left, who was a man of powerful social connection but little intellect and lazy besides.

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So the Virgin was guest of the man who held all power in his hands, though he never seemed aware of himself. Had he known she was like this, Aoi wondered. But then, he always knew everything, which was because he paid attention. It was the secret of his ability.

"But come," the Virgin was saying, languid but with a lilt of trying to please, "we need not be so formal."

The women moved from their straight kneeling lines, the little girls came from the wall beside the door. Cords were pulled to raise the platform curtains, revealing three curtain-stands, though usually a lady's modesty would require only one. The little girls lifted aside two of the stands. The third one had translucent curtains, through which a vague seated figure could be seen.

Outside, beyond the open blinds and just across the verandah, the minister's garden with its stream and bridges, its lake, its sanded paths and well-pruned shrubs, its arbor of lushly blossoming wisteria, stands of bamboo, and fans of iris, clustered ornamental stones, and carefully created vistas was intensely colored as the sun dropped below the clouds and shot slanting light across the city. It was that moment when only beauty is apparent. The Virgin chose this moment to have the last curtain removed.

Her grace in sitting was the essence of the grace of woman: not quite square, but a little sideways at the hips, a pose so flattering to full figures as to make others seem boringly spare. Around her was a rich piling of layered skirts, her long hair swirled across them in a gleaming cascade. Finished with white powder, almost immobile as she spoke, her face had the clarity of a statue's, though the red lips and smudged black brows were completely alive in their perfection.

The princess, at a disadvantage as she mounted the three steps to the enclosure, moved carefully yet still had an aspect of scurrying. Aoi, with exaggerated modesty, stayed where she was, kneeling on a cushion on the great expanse of bare floor. She was unwilling to be manipulated into a subservient attitude. She signalled the two junior ladies-in-waiting to stay with her, but Lady Omi, always proper, accompanied the princess.

Once she had consented to address the princess, the Virgin went on at length. She seemed always to speak slowly, so that her words must be awaited, and she seldom invited comment from the princess. Instead she recited the many regrets she felt at giving up her office, the honors and compliments she had received, and her

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hesitations about the propriety of becoming "a simple subject."

"After all," she said, "I have maintained strict purity for so long . . . ," and she turned her wrist in the air, slowly and eloquently, implying the effort it was to lower herself, all the while looking for the princess's reaction of surprise or of puzzlement about the motive for such a bold change. The princess watched this elegant movement of the wrist, the small expressive shifts of eyes and lips, even the rise of breath under layers of exquisite silks with resentful fascination. When finally she left, just before the lamps were lit, Aoi could see baffled anger in her set and suddenly mottled face.

After that first day, the Virgin did indeed make herself at home. She began by asking for special favors from the maids, special times for her meals, additional bedding, even the importation of lilies to improve the view from her room. Her women would allow the little girls to communicate only with a lady-in-waiting of the princess, and the two junior ladies were soon moved to that part of the house and put on permanent duty there. Complaints about the food came regularly, that it was cold or overcooked or undercooked or unpalatable or not what was wanted that day. Flowers were never unblemished enough, gardeners in the distance never bowed low enough, washing water was never hot enough.

Because he chose his servants carefully from villages on his own estates, and because he treated them with respect and let them know his reliance on their abilities, the minister's household was always a happy one, though sometimes a little boisterous as these self-confident country people managed as they thought best. The Virgin's demands were met but with looks askance and heavy silence, and an air of strain soon spread through the house. Very soon she and her ladies had managed to isolate themselves. No one visited them.

Life in the mansion at Murasakino, which is an isolated place on the edge of the city, had not been very sociable. Because of taboos, the distance, and the eminence of the office, there had been few callers. Now that they had left there, the Virgin and her ladies were avid for company. After a few days of loneliness in the minister's house, the Virgin found herself ready to leave her room. She had the women dress her in the most fashionable of her new clothes—for she had a whole new wardrobe—and she sent word that she would come to see what kind of rooms the princess lived in.

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"There is no help for it, I must receive her," the princess said, "though I have never heard of a person calling on a living space."

In her annoyance, she had every possession hidden, leaving the room bare except for cushions. Refreshments were to be sparse, the blind was lowered to hide the garden. The princess did not want anything attractive in this room.

Such a crowd of ladies came with the Virgin that there were not cushions enough, and Lady Omi, without thinking, went to the closet where all the hidden things were piled together in disorder, extra cushions underneath. Eager to settle the visitors in comfort, she pulled at the cushions and a comb box tumbled out and burst open on the floor. The noise attracted every eye.

"I see you have very severe taste," said the Virgin, "you seem to keep things stored away. But what a lovely old comb!" She indicated a particular one and sent a lady to pick it up.

"That was my mother's," the princess said, her voice strangled with irritation, "but I don't use it myself. It's too old."

The comb was a large wooden one, dark with oil, some of the teeth a little chipped. Attached at the top was a heavy silver filigree set with lapis lazuli in the Chinese style. The unpolished silver was black as lead and the stones had rich color and little of the light matrix. Age and the accidental batterings of long use gave the comb a quality of distinction it could never have had when new and bright. The Virgin held it for a moment, then passed it back.

As before, conversation was one-sided and limited. They stayed and stayed, in spite of the inadequate offerings from the kitchen. And after that day, the Virgin and her women were often in the halls. Though no one sought them out, they would slip by someone's room and sit and talk if they found the occupant at home. They came and went separately or together, the Virgin saying she must learn to be a little independent.

They all dressed with extreme formality, the Virgin especially. Never was her costume less than five layers of robes, though the weather was warm and the princess and her ladies reduced their dresses to three or, if particularly relaxed, only one. Makeup was not neglected, fans, ribbons, and sashes were always changed, the same combinations never seen twice. The Virgin, gorgeously arrayed, moved through the halls with such slow, pacing steps that her progress was almost a series of poses. She might be met at almost any time or appear at almost any door.

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The princess, when dressing, was always irritable. "Tie it tighter," she would say to Lady Omi. "Don't let it droop like a sash unfastened."

"But won't you be too warm?"

"Do you imply that I dress for comfort?"

Or, "Don't give me that robe, I wore it day before yesterday. Haven't new ones come yet?" She would lift the tightly wrapped underrobe from her damp skin. "How I should like to do as Father does and wear my oldest clothes at home, all loose and easy." And they toiled on with makeup and tangled hair.

It was not long before the expected Captain of the Guards came to call. The minister sent for Lady Aoi to serve them wine, which the captain drank freely. He was a tall man with solid, heavy limbs and full cheeks shadowed by an unusually heavy beard shaved clean. Cup after cup of wine seemed not to affect him except that he began to speak of the Virgin.

"They assigned her to my sector of the palace. It was our duty to serve her everyday needs and to protect her from the curious. And, of course, we never allowed pollution near her. She was beauty undisturbed."

Aoi looked at the minister, wondering if the captain was about to say too much. The minister raised his cup, smiling and silent, not too attentive.

"There was great distance . . . " The captain spoke almost to himself. "She had been removed from everybody, and it began to bother me that she was so perfect, so still. Yet I was allowed to sit before her curtain, and she would move it aside at one edge. I could see that, though she had the perfection of a doll, she could speak with her red lips smiling and her eyes lifting to mine."

Outside rain fell with a sudden hiss.

"Hm," the minister said, a low, abstracted sound. He turned to Aoi, and she poured for them both. The minister did not meet her eye.

"Once," the captain said, "she almost broke free—one hot evening when I sat with her and she fanned cool air into her robes. Such perfection invites—" He breathed in until his chest rose high, turned his eyes to Aoi and then the minister. Sobriety dropped cool into his face, he straightened and set down the full cup. "I never touched even the hem of her skirt. But I want to know what woman lies down at night on her damask pallets. Is there life in her dreams, or vacant sleep until time to put on white powder again?

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Can she forget the robes set fold on fold, the drape of her sleeve? Can she be touched without cracking? I have mastered impulse for too long, it is not natural in me." He smiled then, wry. "My way is to be untidy. I am even so untidy as to want to visit this perfect woman."

"We have told her to expect you," said the minister. "She agrees, she waits. Lady Aoi will escort you."

Before the hour of midnight the captain passed the gatekeeper, collected his escorts, who had waited in the street, and rode away with impatient slaps of the reins.

After that night, the captain visited frequently, but it seemed that the three consecutive nights of commitment were to be delayed and that their visitor would be in the minister's house longer than expected. Then the unpleasant incidents began.

"Lady, may I speak to you?" Aoi looked up, dreading to see who it was. Not one of the guests, but the youngest of the princess's ladies-in-waiting. She closed the door and with a worried air seated herself and leaned her head near Aoi to speak in a low voice. "I have lost a few things lately and . . . "

"Lost?" Aoi saw that she did not mean carelessness. "You mean, pilfered?"

"Well, yes. Though I cannot think that, in this house . . . Um, well, will you speak to the minister for me? You know him almost better than the princess does, and you can do it without accusing."

Aoi was a little uncomfortable that her affinity for the minister and their long friendship should lead the young woman to make this kind of comment, but she promised to mention it and to be tactful. Servants often had unknown stresses, and it was not always possible to predict their honesty.

Before she had found a time when she could be alone with the minister, Aoi heard complaints from Lady Omi and from the princess herself. "I have nothing of any value except that old fan with a famous priest's calligraphy on it," said Lady Omi, "and now someone has taken it and I feel quite resentful." Near tears, she still found breath and voice to apologize to the princess. "One shouldn't care about these things, I shouldn't mention it, I don't mean to . . . "

The princess turned to her with a look so intense that Lady Omi drew back, expecting rebuke. "How curious. I left a scroll weight here on my table—" she had restored her room, gradually setting out its normal furnishings "—and now I can't find it anywhere."

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All her frustration of the past weeks flared out. "Oh, this is intolerable. I must speak to Father."

"Let me," said Aoi, "I will do it for you."

The minister, when he returned in the evenings, had not changed his habit of getting into comfortable old clothes and puttering in the garden. In fact, it seemed to Aoi that his shabbiness was almost exaggerated, his tasks unusually grubby as he waded at the edge of the lake rearranging stones, or turned up the pleasure boat to clean its bottom. She had noted that he worked within sight of their guest's open room. So Aoi knew just where to find him in the late dusk. He smiled with pleasure when he saw her, wiped the wet of iris roots from his hands, and led her to large stones set side by side, where they could both sit down.

"Do you think you make your point?" she said.

His laugh was almost silent. "I work very hard at it."

"We have a further point to make." She told him of small things missing. They spoke together for a long time and settled on a plan.

The princess was reluctant but she sent the required message. "Let us test our ladies in the poetry game. Could you come, all of you, in the early afternoon? We will be out late in the day, visiting one of Father's brothers, who is ill." It was true that her uncle had been ill, but the invitation was to sit with him as he recuperated, drink wine under his wisterias, which he said were spectacular this year, and write poetry to remind him of the occasion. They were to be there just before sunset. Because it was not quite the kind of outing in which one could include extra guests, the princess slightly mispresented their errand as she issued the invitation that would compensate for neglect later in the day.

The game of poetry was lively, as always. When a card is turned and its lines of a famous poem are revealed, accompanying lines that either begin or complete the poem must be recited, and the quickest player wins. Normally the princess's ladies had an edge over any competing team because of Aoi's deep knowledge of the classics. But today she was peculiarly inattentive and hesitant, and the Virgin's ladies, highly excited, won every round. They returned laughing with triumph to her large room, and the princess and her women dressed and departed.

The day had been warm, the sky hung with rifts of cloud that moved slowly eastward. At sunset there was a display of rose and gold, fading to purple twilight. The minister's house was still as shadows deepened and the garden became a patterned place: solid

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massed shapes of shrubs, white sand, ripples of water bouncing with reflected deep, deep blue. In the princess's room the garden blind was drawn, light from outside fractured into fine horizontal lines. Furnishings—a curtain-screen across one corner near the door, a cushion slightly awry, two more overlapping, a cosmetics chest with the comb box beside it, a fan left on the floor—had a quality of waiting in the quiet emptiness, a quality of usefulness to be resumed.

When the door panel slid back without sound, there was no light from the hall to change the dense heaviness of dark in the room. The cloth of hems brushed the floor, stopped, brushed again. Solid blackness of a woman's figure passed across the light-striped blind, then knelt. Faint clicks, a tiny hollow knock sounded in the room, and again the brushes of moving cloth.

There was a cough, a small, deliberate human sound in the throat. The figure dropped to a crouch in the middle of the floor.

"Whoever you are," said the voice of Aoi, who was hidden behind the curtain-screen, "you know that I am here."

Quiet hummed, there was no movement.

"If I liked, I could call others and show them that comb tucked in your belt. It is the comb, I think?"

Silks rustling, the figure crept backward.

Aoi continued to speak in a musing tone. "Possessions do not make a person worthy, the sutras teach us. But for some there is never enough strengthening from outside themselves. You know that you have done these things that are wrong, though perhaps you have not thought of it like that, feeling only your own need. But now I know also, and that makes a change, I think."

There was the sound of a light snap as the comb was laid on the floor. The figure stood, almost invisible now against the wall, and edged toward the door.

"Unless you think well of yourself, others will not respect you," said Aoi. "I am not much of a person for talking. And I have an unreliable memory. You, though, perhaps you will remember this incident and let it speak to you. Go now, my head is turned away."

There was such chill in the phrase "turned away" that the woman cried out as she escaped.

The minister, during his daily calls on the Virgin, began to discuss government affairs with her, in a general way. At first she was shy and would not respond, but he was insistent in asking for opinion and always found her sensible. She had been in the court

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all her life and knew more about the ways of government than she realized. Gradually she responded to him with more assurance.

On one occasion, when a servant's sister was visiting with a baby (the sister had heard the Kamo Virgin was in the house and wanted a glimpse of her), the minister came bearing the child on his arm. It was early, before full makeup and dressing were finished, and when he sat with the baby within sight of the Virgin, who had hidden behind a curtain, she was alarmed. The minister, unperturbed, edged closer. He made no great display of cooing and fondling, but let the child lie in his embrace so that she could see the tiny hands and feet, black downy hair and eyes that sought faces. The Virgin, realizing that she had not yet dressed, risked a little involvement and touched the child's hand, which instantly grasped her finger. She looked stunned and drew away, but reached again to touch hair and again to stroke a cheek with the back of her finger, ancient caress of women to babies.

"Unh," the minister said.

The captain's visits continued and there came a night when he stayed until dawn, news that was passed throughout the house in the morning. All day there was tension. Would he come again that night? He did. And when he was received on the third night, he suggested with sly diffidence that the festive rice cakes that celebrated a marriage might be appropriate in the morning.

And so the former Kamo Virgin was married and became known, even long after he had risen from his low rank, as the Captain's Princess. She left the house of the minister wearing her gorgeous new clothes, all in shades of deep and light pink, with one robe of patterned white glazed gauze and a Chinese jacket of red damask over all. She wore her side hair dressed high, with pins and combs to hold it and a few leaves of the sacred tree denoting her past as servant of the gods. She was modest and quiet as she said goodbye.

"How kindly you have sheltered me," she said to the minister. "It has been a long time since I lived in a family setting. You have received me like a father."

The minister made the customary demurrals, " . . . Rough abode . . . miserable accommodations . . . rude country manners . . . "

"It has been quite refreshing to see your skills in the garden," she said. "How many men in this city know the undersides of their lake stones as you do?"

"The undersides are not always attractive, but I find it instructive to know the whole of how things are set."

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"Just so," she said.

Approaching the women she became nervous. She had never been sure which of them had spoken to her in the princess's darkened room or if the woman who spoke had known the identity of the intruder. "I will miss your company," she said.

The princess, remembering the beginning of her own marriage, felt sudden kinship and hope. Their relations had improved during the past weeks, and she found her guest not so imposing and demanding after all. "Please come to us again, if you want a change of scene," she said.

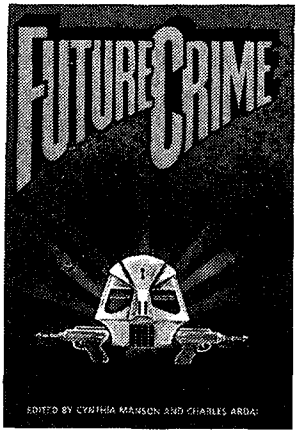
"In this house," said the former priestess, looking toward the garden from the main hall, where they were all gathered, "I feel I can always come as a small part of a larger whole." Her eyes on the farthest trees against the south wall, she paused, with an air of considering. "Yes, I have become very comfortable here. Among friends."

They saw her off, a tall woman, stately and not at all affected by the confusion of escorts and horses, by the runners who cleared a path through the throngs gathered to see her pass in the captain's carriage. Just before she left them, she looked over her fan, with a glance down at her scarlet damask, color for royalty. "It is what they expect," she said.

In cleaning the room, the servants found the scroll weight, the fan, and sashes and ribbons that had not been missed—all left behind. Lady Omi never again mentioned her anger that the fan was stolen. The junior ladies opened their eyes wide but were too well-trained to comment. The princess, made appreciative of the beautiful old comb of her mother's, used it occasionally but then put it away again. Aoi, as was her habit, summed up the visit in a poem.

A cloud descended
Cannot preserve emptiness
But must fit to shapes
It comes among and be filled
With the common life it finds.

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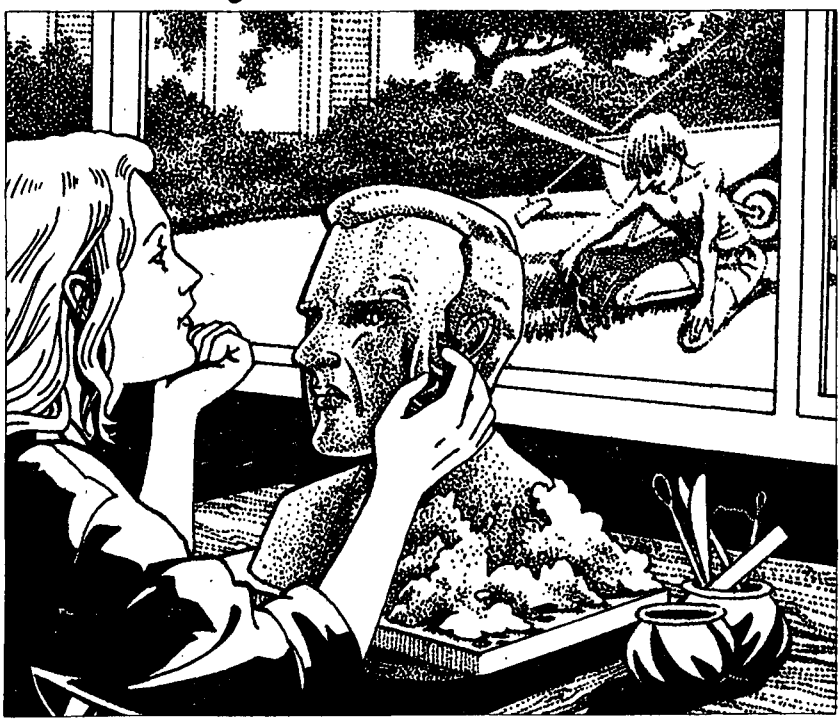
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The Perfect Husband
by Racine Hiet



Dorothy Donnely, owner of the Dead End Funeral Home in the town of Wakefield, which housed the big city's cemeteries, watched sadly as Sadie Finch paid her last respects to Braidie Finch.

"That poor dear young woman," Dorothy sighed. "It was lovely of you, Mrs. Nochatoo, to drive her in from the city in her time of sorrow."

"Oh, it was my pleasure," Mrs. Nochatoo said. "Mrs. Finch is a nice woman and was one of my most promising art students."

As Mrs. Nochatoo drove Sadie Finch home, she said, "That

Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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bust you made of your husband was perfect. You really captured his essence. Of course, your husband was a work of art."

"Yes, I know that," Sadie said.

"Must've been rather difficult to keep a man like that?"

"He always came home to me at five thirty, *precisely,*" Sadie said.

"Precisely? Never late?" Mrs. Nochatoo asked, her eyes opened wide.

"Never," Sadie answered. "He was never even stuck in a traffic jam."

"No, that would never do. All frustrated, the sweat pouring down his neck."

"Oh, *never,"* cried Sadie. "He never sweated."

"He was the perfect husband, wasn't he?" Mrs. Nochatoo said enviously, thinking about Harold, who was definitely not her better half.

"Yes, perfect," sighed Sadie Finch. "And that was the problem, you see."

To be quite honest, Mrs. Nochatoo could not see.

Sadie continued. "I often ask myself how such a thing as a perfect husband could have happened to Sadie Thompson, least likely to succeed."

Least likely to succeed at killing herself, too, thought Mrs. Nochatoo. Sadie Finch had jumped out of her third-story garden room window and had landed on her husband. He died instantly; she survived.

Braidie Finch was obviously the perfect gentleman as well.

Sadie then told Mrs. Nochatoo the story of how Braidie Finch had discovered her in the Greasy Spoon Restaurant, where she worked as a waitress in her hometown, WaWa.

He had stopped in for a root beer and french fries before getting on his way to somewhere else.

Anywhere else was better than WaWa, Sadie said.

Against one wall was a deer head with magnificent antlers. Sadie would stare at the head of the beautiful wild creature pinned against the wall, and the tears would well up in her eyes.

"Its only crime," she told Mrs. Nochatoo, "was that it was not human. If one believes that only humans are made in God's image, then the deer was imperfect and deserved its fate."

The deer was the only trophy that WaWa contained. No baccalaureates hung on WaWa's walls. There was no greatness in WaWa. No one in the world knew about WaWa unless he'd bumped into it on his way to somewhere else.

Anywhere else, Sadie said.

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And no one in the world knew somebody from WaWa. There were no Somebodies in WaWa. WaWa was a very ordinary place made up of very ordinary humans whose only trophy was the perfect head of a deer whose only crime had been that it was not a human—who was made in God's image and who was therefore perfect.

When Sadie was born, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were utterly dismayed to discover that she was an ordinary child. No human being wants a child who is ordinary. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were ordinary humans, so it was logical to assume that they would have an ordinary child. But there was no logic in WaWa. If there had been, everyone there would be somewhere else.

Anywhere else, Sadie said.

Into the Greasy Spoon Restaurant sauntered Braidie Finch. He was immaculate in his pressed pants with the crease falling just so, a bleached white shirt with starched stiff collar, and black polished shoes. Everyone stared. A perfect human being. Braidie Finch stared back. He had never been to such an ordinary place filled with such ordinary people.

Sadie Thompson took Braidie Finch's order, absentmindedly fingering her stringy hair while trying discreetly to adjust her slip, which hung below her shapeless off-white uniform. She spilled his root beer and then apologized to him profusely while dabbing at the oil-soaked french fries with a napkin.

"Oh, what a challenge I must have been to him," Sadie said. "The ultimate challenge—to transform such utter ordinariness, to recreate me in his perfect image. To get hopelessly ordinary Sadie Thompson, who had been the endless despair of my ordinary parents and my ordinary teachers, to a standard where I could actually be as decorative as the deer was. Not as perfect as Braidie Finch . . ."

Of course not, thought Mrs. Nochatoo.

" . . . but the most perfect of all the ordinary human beings who lived in WaWa.

" 'My, what Braidie Finch has done for you, Sadie,' my mother marveled. 'He has recreated you.' And he had, Mrs. Nochatoo. He had taken me in hand. And by the time he was ready to leave WaWa, to go somewhere else, *anywhere else,* I was, according to the inhabitants of WaWa, WOW WOW.

"A spring flower, my father said. And all because of Braidie Finch. Now everyone in WaWa stared at me. I was the first

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Somebody in WaWa, and I was very, very happy. Every human being wants to be a Somebody. But Braidie Finch insisted on picking the spring flower and taking it home with him. I was his trophy."

When they reached Sadie's house, Mrs. Nochatoo admired once again her strikingly designed three story home in an exclusive neighborhood. She saw Sadie's BMW parked next to Braidie's (a His and Hers anniversary gift), which was parked next to his Lamborghini sports car.

Mrs. Nochatoo was bursting with curiosity. What, she wondered, could have possibly driven Sadie to throw herself out her third story window?

"Mrs. Finch," she said, "I would love to see the inside of your beautiful house. Would you mind terribly?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Nochatoo." Sadie seemed to be pleased, even touched, by her interest.

They strolled up the long path leading to her Art Deco home.

The gardener bumped into Sadie Finch.

Sadie introduced him. His name was Abe Kelensky.

Abe Kelensky reached only to Sadie's chest. His hair was a mousy color, long and unkempt, the bangs falling into his watery red eyes. He had a mole on the tip of his pointed nose.

After he left them, Sadie told Mrs. Nochatoo that the gardener was only twenty-two.

Heavens! the teacher thought. He looks at least twenty years older. The shame of it all.

"I used to watch Abe with fascination from the window of my garden room," Sadie said earnestly. "As he bent over the flowers, I gazed at his tiny behind wrapped in his baggy red bermuda shorts. His naked, scrawny chest dripped with sweat. You see, Mrs. Nochatoo, he was a rare human being indeed, perfectly accepting of his imperfection. No, he did not merely accept it. He gloried in it."

Sadie picked up a pink rose from the ground. "Do you know what Abe Kelensky once said to me?"

Mrs. Nochatoo shook her head and shrugged. Why, she thought, would anyone care?

Sadie sniffed the rose. "Abe said to me, 'All I ever wanted is to smell the flowers.'

" 'No ambition?' I asked him.

" 'Not any.'

" 'But look around you,' I said. 'Don't you want what someone else has? Don't you want to be like someone else? Wouldn't you sell your soul for the perfect life?'

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" 'No,' he answered.

" 'Don't you hate being ordinary?'

" 'No,' he insisted.

" 'How *extraordinary,*' I said. 'Do you think Mr. Finch is perfect?'

" 'Doesn't everyone?' he asked.

" 'Naturally,' I said.

" 'How can you stand it?' he asked.

" 'I can't.' And then I just stared at him incredulously. You see, no one else had ever asked me that, Mrs. Nochatoo."

Well, with good reason, the teacher thought to herself. And she really could not, in all honesty, see why Sadie Finch could not stand having a perfect husband. She thought that a little perfection wouldn't have hurt her Harold one bit.

Sadie Finch continued. "Abe Kelensky had bumped into me, and he hadn't even said he was sorry.

" 'Aren't you sorry?' I asked him.

" 'No,' he said.

" 'But why not?'

" 'I'm glad I bumped into you. I really don't bump into you enough, Sadie.'

" 'Sadie?' I said. 'You know I'm married to Mr. Finch. Therefore, you know I am Mrs. Finch. Why are you calling me Sadie?'

" 'Isn't Sadie your name?'

" 'Yes, but—' It wasn't proper. He was only our gardener, for heaven's sake. He was far too familiar with me. He was treating me as if I weren't married to Braidie Finch, as if I was ordinary. Ordinary like him. Which was true, of course. How *extraordinary.*"

She smiled at Mrs. Nochatoo. It was the first time she had smiled tonight. The teacher smiled back at her, encouraging her.

Sadie continued her story. "After our strange and wonderful conversation, I watched him go into the cramped quarters behind our grand house. *Abe Kelensky.* Sounded foreign. Maybe he was even an immigrant. Maybe he was even of mixed background. Maybe he was even illegitimate. I knew there was nothing I could do about it. I was falling hopelessly in love with my gardener."

Now Mrs. Nochatoo stared incredulously.

"Don't you see?" Sadie asked.

Mrs. Nochatoo shook her head.

"No, I don't see," she said.

Sadie tried to explain. "Abe Kelensky was so perfectly imperfect, so extraordinarily ordinary, that he was the most extraordinarily imperfect human being I had ever met."

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Ha, thought Mrs. Nochatoo. She hadn't met Harold. No, she still did not see. But she had the feeling that Sadie was telling her all this because she wanted the art teacher to understand.

Mrs. Nochatoo was right. As they entered the marble hall, Sadie Finch set the scene for her.

"The last time I came home from your class, Mrs. Nochatoo, I saw my husband smiling at me with those straight white teeth of his. He said to me, 'I've reorganized the kitchen for you, Sadie. I don't know how you could function in it the way it was. I want to make things easier for you.'

" 'That's generous of you,' I told Braidie.

" 'Of course,' he answered."

Sadie Finch sighed and discarded the rose. "He had just recently returned from jogging and was still wearing his designer jogging suit with its classic herringbone pattern. His stomach was flat and hard, and his perpetually boyish face with its year-round tan was clear and closely shaved."

"How marvelous!" Mrs. Nochatoo exclaimed before she could stop herself.

Sadie sighed again. "Braidie went jogging every evening after work; at lunch, he worked out at his health club. He was in real estate. He knocked down low-income residences and erected highrise condominiums and deluxe townhouses in their place."

The widow slid across the shiny no-wax (no yellow build-up) kitchen floor and opened the spacious cupboards. "Come see, Mrs. Nochatoo."

The teacher noted that everything was in alphabetical order, from Aunt Jemima's Pancake Mix to Hunt's tomato paste to Kidd Bros. honey to Uncle Ben's Rice. The spice rack on the very large countertop, made with the most hardy and stain-resistant material, was filled accordingly. Basil, dillweed, garlic, etc.

Mrs. Nochatoo followed Sadie into the living room and sat down on the couch while Sadie went to the fireplace opposite her and caressed the bust on the mantel.

"The bust really is perfect," the art teacher told her.

"Thank you," Sadie said as she sat down beside her. "Mrs. Nochatoo, do you remember when you said in class that art was a process by which one attempted to transcend the ordinary?"

"Yes," she said, quite flattered to be quoted.

"But Braidie Finch was perfect. Therefore, I had my own ultimate challenge—to tran-

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scend the extraordinary, to recreate perfection. The bust is *my* trophy."

Sadie explained that she had taken the art class because Braidie Finch had decided that it was time for her to express herself creatively. There it was on the smooth white wall, on Braidie Finch's Road to Perfection Chart, especially created for her: #3,573—Creative Self-Expression.

She had decided on art classes because a teacher had once told her that though she had no real body to speak of, she did have an artist's soul.

"I didn't know what an artist's soul was," Sadie said. "But if one did not have a real body to speak of, it was nice to know that one had a definite soul. And an artist's soul would definitely do. Also," she said, waving her hands about the room in demonstration, "Braidie was a *serious* art collector, though primarily of modern abstract expressionism."

Sadie had decided on sculpture because she liked the idea of creating something with her own hands. She had decided on the bust of Braidie Finch because she liked the idea of recreating him as he had recreated her.

Mrs. Nochatoo roamed about the tastefully decorated room admiring the paintings while Sadie prepared tea for them. She poured from a sterling silver teapot into delicately beautiful teacups.

The teacher asked, "You don't have any little ones, do you, Mrs. Finch?"

She shook her head sadly. "When I first married Braidie Finch, five long, l-o-n-g years ago, I checked the chart to see when we were to have children. I was already twenty-seven, and I felt that Have Children must be at least #2 or #3 on Braidie Finch's Road to Perfection Chart. But Have Children was nowhere to be seen. When I asked him, he said with shock, 'But how can I hope to reproduce myself?' I'm afraid that for my husband, Mrs. Nochatoo, sex left too much to chance. It was ancient, it was outmoded, it was passe. In short, sex was imperfect. But someday, Braidie told me, when technology and modern science were perfected, he would clone himself."

"That will never happen now." Mrs. Nochatoo shook her head sadly. The shame of it all.

Sadie sipped her tea, appearing rather melancholy as she confided, "Braidie had himself sterilized, Mrs. Nochatoo, but he made sure that his frozen sperm would preserve for all eternity his perfect genes."

When they had finished their

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tea, Sadie led her upstairs to her huge master bedroom, newly redecorated by Braidie Finch before his death.

"It's interesting," Mrs. Nochatoo said in wonder. "It's so . . . so . . . "

"Nouveau Navajo," Sadie informed the teacher.

She opened Braidie's bureau drawers. "This one was for my husband's Burberry scarves, that one for his fishnet designer briefs, and here he kept his socks, paired and ordered by color."

She threw herself backwards onto her four-poster kingsize waterbed. "Every night we watched *Star Trek* video cassettes on our floor to ceiling TV. Braidie would munch on brie and drink Perrier in his custom made crepe de chine silk pajamas, his gold designer chain encircling his neck."

Mrs. Nochatoo felt as if they were playing, *This Is Your Life*. She still didn't see. Sadie Finch's life was Perrier and silk pajamas. Her own life was empty beer bottles and longjohns. But she didn't have a third story garden room window to jump out of.

Sadie continued. "*Star Trek* reruns were Braidie's favorite show. Mr. Spock was so rational, so self-controlled, so logical, my husband said. He would have been perfect, Braidie told me, if only he weren't a Vulcan. Which was not human. Which was an alien being. Which was even worse than being an immigrant. And then, of course, there were those ears!

"You know, Mrs. Nochatoo, my husband never had any trouble falling asleep. *Never.* And he never had any trouble staying awake, either."

Of course, Mrs. Nochatoo thought.

They finally made their way to the third floor, to the lush, fresh smelling garden room that had been Sadie's refuge. She told the last of her story.

All through the summer, Sadie had lived in two different worlds. Shaping, molding, recreating Braidie Finch's perfection. And watching Abe Kelensky sink deeper and deeper into his ordinariness.

As she watched her gardener from the large window that stretched from one side of the room to the other, Sadie noticed that with the passing of time, Abe became thinner and thinner. His tiny behind swam in the baggy red bermuda shorts. His hairless chest became scrawnier and scrawnier. His mousy bangs that fell into his watery red eyes grew and grew until they touched the mole on the tip of his pointed nose. But the more imperfect Abe Kelen-

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sky became, the more passionately Sadie Finch desired him, to touch his ordinary body, to rub his pointed nose against her own, to soak her hands in his long, oily hair.

One day she went into the garden. She noticed that Abe Kelensky was having a terrible problem pulling out a dandelion.

"Why are you so weak?" she asked him.

"I'm weak with love for you," Abe Kelensky said to her chest.

Sadie Finch fell to her knees. "I love you, too. Desperately. Passionately."

Abe Kelensky fell to his knees. "Sadie, my love," he said to her chest, "I've dreamed of hearing you say that."

They went to his cramped quarters, behind her grand house. She knocked her head on the ceiling. She nearly broke her back on his lumpy, squeaky single bed. In the corners of the crowded room hung spiderwebs. A cockroach jumped on the dirty wooden floor. He removed his mismatched socks and baggy red bermuda shorts and she tried very hard not to land on top of him at any time for fear of crushing his scrawny little body, which was weak with love for her. His pointed nose, with the mole on the very tip, got in their way, and he spent long moments kissing her soft chin which he mistook for her soft lips. Abe Kelensky was such an ordinary man, and Sadie Finch had never been so perfectly happy.

They continued in their ordinary fashion to make love every afternoon. And then, just before she completed Braidie Finch's bust, she discovered that she was pregnant. She had not only recreated Braidie's perfection but she was about to recreate Abe Kelensky's and her own ordinariness.

When she told Abe Kelensky, he was overjoyed.

"Then you'll marry me, won't you?" he said.

"But you're shorter than I am. You're weaker than I am. You're younger than I am. It breaks all the rules of the Perfect Society."

"But we're not perfect. We're ordinary."

"Then it's *perfect,*" she cried.

"Yes, perfect," sang Abe Kelensky as he stood up on his tiptoes and kissed Sadie Finch on her soft chin.

"But what Abe and I forgot," Sadie told Mrs. Nochatoo, "was that I was already married to Braidie. Braidie Finch's Road to Perfection Chart goes on for miles, and he wasn't finished by a long way perfecting me. I know he could have gone back to WaWa and found another ordinary human being. Most

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women would die for a perfect husband."

"Well, in your case the perfect husband died for you," Mrs. Nochatoo reminded her.

Sadie ignored the interruption. "But my husband wasn't about to let me go." She sighed. "Braidie Finch always finished what he began."

Of course, thought Mrs. Nochatoo. "So when you saw that there was no escape, Mrs. Finch, you decided to end it all?"

Sadie nodded. "I called my mother in WaWa. 'Mom,' I sobbed into the phone, 'I think I'm going to die.'

" 'Oh, yes, yes, Sadie,' my mother gasped. 'Die of happiness. You're a lucky woman, Sadie. Luckier than most. You have a perfect husband.'

"Nobody understands. But you do, Mrs. Nochatoo, don't you?"

The teacher nodded. But to be quite honest, although she was moved by the story of Sadie's love, she could only really make sense of one thing Sadie Finch said—that there was no logic in WaWa, and that's obviously where the poor woman belonged.

"Don't you see, Mrs. Nochatoo? There was no other way. The poor deer in the Greasy Spoon Restaurant in WaWa was dead and could no longer be tortured by the perfect human race. But not so for me. Braidie Finch took me to the city where there are no ordinary humans, at least no one who will admit to being one. And for five years, five long, l-o-n-g years, he killed me slowly, so slowly, with perfection. I want you to understand."

All Mrs. Nochatoo understood at that moment was that soon she'd be seeing Harold in his longjohns standing before a cracked mirror, beer potbelly protruding, squeezing a pimple. A large ugly blackhead. I'd throw myself out that window right now, she thought, if only I could be sure that Harold would soften my landing. *Wait a minute!* "What time did you say you jumped out of the window, Mrs. Finch?"

"I didn't. But it was five thirty."

"Five thirty, *precisely?*"

Sadie nodded.

"I see," Mrs. Nochatoo said. She finally *did* see.

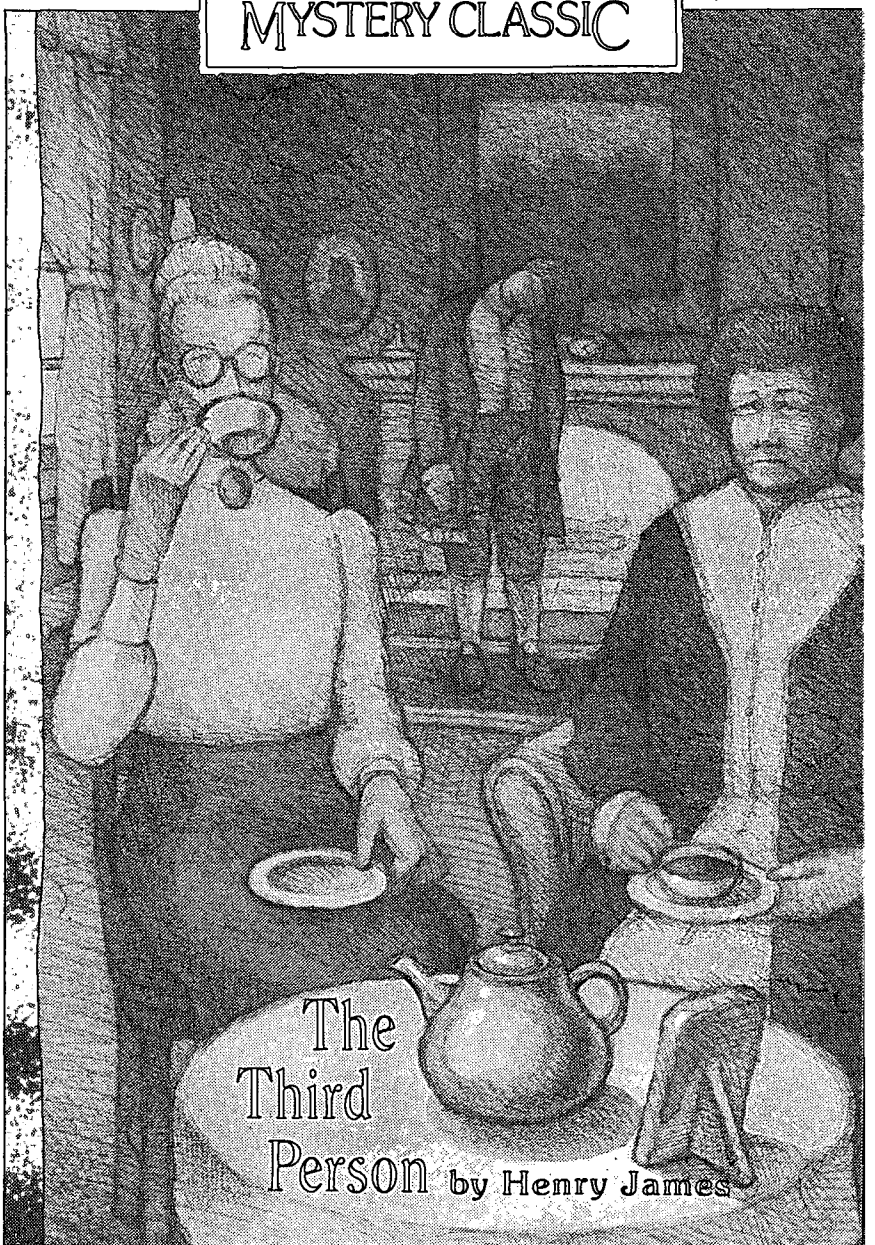
Soon Sadie Finch would be locking up the perfect house with its trophy on the mantel. And Sadie Thompson from WaWa would finally feel free to smell the flowers like Abe Kelensky and be proud of what she was—

An ordinary human being.

Who had committed a perfect crime.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Third Person

by Henry James

Illustration by Jim Adams

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When, a few years since, two good ladies, previously not intimate nor indeed more than slightly acquainted, found themselves domiciled together in the small but ancient town of Marr, it was as a result, naturally, of special considerations. They bore the same name and were second cousins; but their paths had not hitherto crossed; there had not been coincidence of age to draw them together; and Miss Frush, the more mature, had spent much of her life abroad. She was a bland, shy, sketching person, whom fate had condemned to a monotony—triumphing over variety—of Swiss and Italian *pensions;* in any one of which, with her well-fastened hat, her gauntlets and her stout boots, her camp stool, her sketchbook, her Tauchnitz novel, she would have served with peculiar propriety as a frontispiece to the natural history of the English old maid. She would have struck you indeed, poor Miss Frush, as so happy an instance of the type that you would perhaps scarce have been able to equip her with the dignity of the individual. This was what she enjoyed, however, for those brought nearer—a very insistent identity, once even of prettiness, but which now, balanced and bony, timid and inordinately queer, with its utterance all vague interjection and its aspect all eyeglass and teeth, might be acknowledged without inconvenience and deplored without reserve. Miss Amy, her kinswoman, who, ten years her junior, showed a different figure—such as, oddly enough, though formed almost wholly in English air, might have appeared much more to betray a foreign influence—Miss Amy was brown, brisk, and expressive: when really young she had even been pronounced showy. She had an innocent vanity on the subject of her foot, a member which she somehow regarded as a guarantee of her wit, or at least of her good taste. Even had it not been pretty she flattered herself it would have been shod: she would never—no, never, like Susan—have given it up. Her bright brown eye was comparatively bold, and she had accepted Susan once for all as a frump. She even thought her, and silently deplored her as, a goose. But she was none the less herself a lamb.

They had benefited, this innocuous pair, under the will of an old aunt, a prodigiously ancient gentlewoman, of whom, in her later time, it had been given them, mainly by the office of others, to see almost nothing; so that the little property they came in for had the happy effect of a windfall. Each, at least, pretended to the other that she had never dreamed—as in truth there had been small encouragement for dreams in the sad character of what they now

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spoke of as the late lady's "dreadful *entourage*." Terrorized and deceived, as they considered, by her own people, Mrs. Frush was scantily enough to have been counted on for an act of almost inspired justice. The good luck of her husband's nieces was that she had really outlived, for the most part, their ill-wishers and so, at the very last, had died without the blame of diverting fine Frush property from fine Frush use. Property quite of her own she had done as she liked with; but she had pitied poor expatriated Susan and had remembered poor unhusbanded Amy, though lumping them together perhaps a little roughly in her final provision. Her will directed that, should no other arrangement be more convenient to her executors, the old house at Marr might be sold for their joint advantage. What befell, however, in the event, was that the two legatees, advised in due course, took an early occasion—and quite without concert—to judge their prospects on the spot. They arrived at Marr, each on her own side, and they were so pleased with Marr that they remained. So it was that they met: Miss Amy, accompanied by the office boy of the local solicitor, presented herself at the door of the house to ask admittance of the caretaker. But when the door opened it offered to sight not the caretaker, but an unexpected, unexpecting lady in a very old waterproof, who held a long-handled eyeglass very much as a child holds a rattle. Miss Susan, already in the field, roaming, prying, meditating in the absence on an errand of the woman in charge, offered herself in this manner as in settled possession; and it was on that idea that, through the eyeglass, the cousins viewed each other with some penetration even before Amy came in. Then at last when Amy did come in it was not, any more than Susan, to go out again.

It would take us too far to imagine what might have happened had Mrs. Frush made it a condition of her benevolence that the subjects of it should inhabit, should live at peace together, under the roof she left them; but certain it is that as they stood there they had at the same moment the same unprompted thought. Each became aware on the spot that the dear old house itself was exactly what she, and exactly what the other, wanted; it met in perfection their longing for a quiet harbor and an assured future; each, in short, was willing to take the other in order to get the house. It was therefore not sold; it was made, instead, their own, as it stood, with the dead lady's extremely "good" old appurtenances not only undisturbed and undivided, but piously reconstructed and infi-

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nitely admired, the agents of her testamentary purpose rejoicing meanwhile to see the business so simplified. They might have had their private doubts—or their wives might have; might cynically have predicted the sharpest of quarrels, before three months were out, between the deluded yoke-fellows, and the dissolution of the partnership with every circumstance of recrimination. All that need be said is that such prophets would have prophesied vulgarly. The Misses Frush were not vulgar; they had drunk deep of the cup of singleness and found it prevailingly bitter; they were not unacquainted with solitude and sadness, and they recognized with due humility the supreme opportunity of their lives. By the end of three months, moreover, each knew the worst about the other. Miss Amy took her evening nap before dinner, an hour at which Miss Susan could never sleep—it was so odd; whereby Miss Susan took hers after that meal, just at the hour when Miss Amy was keenest for talk. Miss Susan, erect and unsupported, had feelings as to the way in which, in almost any posture that could pass for a seated one, Miss Amy managed to find a place in the small of her back for two out of the three sofa cushions—a smaller place, obviously, than they had ever been intended to fit.

But when this was said all was said; they continued to have, on either side, the pleasant consciousness of a personal soil, not devoid of fragmentary ruins, to dig in. They had a theory that their lives had been immensely different, and each appeared now to the other to have conducted her career so perversely only that she should have an unfamiliar range of anecdote for her companion's ear. Miss Susan, at foreign *pensions,* had met the Russian, the Polish, the Danish, and even an occasional flower of the English, nobility, as well as many of the most extraordinary Americans, who, as she said, had made everything of her and with whom she had remained, often, in correspondence; while Miss Amy, after all less conventional, at the end of long years of London, abounded in reminiscences of literary, artistic, and even—Miss Susan heard it with bated breath—theatrical society, under the influence of which she had written—there, it came out!—a novel that had been anonymously published and a play that had been strikingly type-copied. Not the least charm, clearly, of this picturesque outlook at Marr would be the support that might be drawn from it for getting back, as she hinted, with "general society" bravely sacrificed, to "real work." She had in her head hundreds of plots—with which the future, accordingly, seemed to bristle for Miss Susan. The latter,

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on her side, was only waiting for the wind to go down to take up again her sketching. The wind at Marr was often high, as was natural in a little old huddled, red-roofed, historic south-coast town which had once been in a manner mistress, as the cousins reminded each other, of the "Channel," and from which, high and dry on its hilltop though it might be, the sea had not so far receded as not to give, constantly, a taste of temper. Miss Susan came back to English scenery with a small sigh of fondness to which the consciousness of Alps and Apennines only gave more of a quaver; she had picked out her subjects and, with her head on one side and a sense that they were easier abroad, sat sucking her watercolor brush and nervously—perhaps even a little inconsistently—waiting and hesitating. What had happened was that they had, each for herself, rediscovered the country; only Miss Amy, emergent from Bloomsbury lodgings, spoke of it as primroses and sunsets, and Miss Susan, rebounding from the Arno and the Reuss, called it, with a shy, synthetic pride, simply England.

The country was at any rate in the house with them as well as in the little green girdle and in the big blue belt. It was in the objects and relics that they handled together and wondered over, finding in them a ground for much inferred importance and invoked romance, stuffing large stories into very small openings and pulling every faded bell rope that might jingle rustily into the past. They were still here in the presence, at all events, of their common ancestors, as to whom, more than ever before, they took only the best for granted. Was not the best, for that matter—the best, that is, of little melancholy, middling, disinherited Marr—seated in every stiff chair of the decent old house and stitched into the patchwork of every quaint old counterpane? Two hundred years of it squared themselves in the brown, paneled parlor, creaked patiently on the wide staircase, and bloomed herbaceously in the red-walled garden. There was nothing anyone had ever done or been at Marr that a Frush hadn't done it or been it. Yet they wanted more of a picture and talked themselves into the fancy of it; there were portraits—half a dozen, comparatively recent (they called 1800 comparatively recent), and something of a trial to a descendant who had copied Titian at the Pitti; but they were curious of detail and would have liked to people a little more thickly their backward space, to set it up behind their chairs as a screen embossed with figures. They threw off theories and small imaginations, and almost conceived themselves engaged in researches; all

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of which made for pomp and circumstance. Their desire was to discover something, and, emboldened by the broader sweep of wing of her companion, Miss Susan herself was not afraid of discovering something bad. Miss Amy it was who had first remarked, as a warning, that this was what it might all lead to. It was she, moreover, to whom they owed the formula that, had anything *very* bad ever happened at Marr, they should be sorry if a Frush hadn't been in it. This was the moment at which Miss Susan's spirit had reached its highest point: she had declared, with her odd, breathless laugh, a prolonged, an alarmed or alarming gasp, that she should really be quite ashamed. And so they rested awhile; not saying quite how far they were prepared to go in crime—not giving the matter a name. But there would have been little doubt for an observer that each supposed the other to mean that she not only didn't draw the line at murder, but stretched it so as to take in—well, gay deception. If Miss Susan could conceivably have asked whether Don Juan had ever touched at that port, Miss Amy would, to a certainty, have wanted to know by way of answer at what port he had *not* touched. It was only unfortunately true that no one of the portraits of gentlemen looked at all like him and no one of those of ladies suggested one of his victims.

At last, nonetheless, the cousins had a find, came upon a box of old odds and ends, mainly documentary; partly printed matter, newspapers and pamphlets yellow and grey with time, and, for the rest, epistolary—several packets of letters, faded, scarce decipherable, but clearly sorted for preservation and tied, with sprigged ribbon of a faraway fashion, into little groups. Marr, below ground, is solidly founded—underlaid with great straddling cellars, sound and dry, that are like the groined crypts of churches and that present themselves to the meagre modern conception as the treasure chambers of stout merchants and bankers in the old bustling days. A recess in the thickness of one of the walls had yielded up, on resolute investigation—that of the local youth employed for odd jobs and who had happened to explore in this direction on his own account—a collection of rusty superfluities among which the small chest in question had been dragged to light. It produced of course an instant impression and figured as a discovery; though indeed as rather a deceptive one on its having, when forced open, nothing better to show, at the best, than a quantity of rather illegible correspondence. The good ladies had naturally had for the moment a fluttered hope of old golden guineas—a miser's hoard; perhaps

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even of a hatful of those foreign coins of old fashioned romance, ducats, doubloons, pieces of eight, as are sometimes found to have come to hiding, from overseas, in ancient ports. But they had to accept their disappointment—which they sought to do by making the best of the papers, by agreeing, in other words, to regard them as wonderful. Well, they *were,* doubtless, wonderful; which didn't prevent them, however, from appearing to be, on superficial inspection, also rather a weary labyrinth. Baffling, at any rate, to Miss Susan's unpracticed eyes, the little pale-ribboned packets were, for several evenings, round the fire, while she luxuriously dozed, taken in hand by Miss Amy; with the result that on a certain occasion when, toward nine o'clock, Miss Susan woke up, she found her fellow laborer fast asleep. A slightly irritated confession of ignorance of the Gothic character was the further consequence, and the upshot of this, in turn, was the idea of appeal to Mr. Patten. Mr. Patten was the vicar and was known to interest himself, as such, in the ancient annals of Marr; in addition to which—and to its being even held a little that his sense of the affairs of the hour was sometimes sacrificed to such inquiries—he was a gentleman with a humor of his own, a flushed face, a bushy eyebrow, and a black wideawake worn sociably askew. "He will tell us," said Amy Frush, "if there's anything in them."

"Yet if it should be," Susan suggested, "anything we mayn't like?"

"Well, that's just what I'm thinking of," returned Miss Amy in her offhand way. "If it's anything we shouldn't know—"

"We've only to tell him not to tell us? Oh, certainly," said mild Miss Susan. She took upon herself even to give him that warning when, on the invitation of our friends, Mr. Patten came to tea and to talk things over; Miss Amy sitting by and raising no protest, but distinctly promising herself that, whatever there might be to be known, and however objectionable, she would privately get it out of their initiator. She found herself already hoping that it *would* be something too bad for her cousin—too bad for anyone else at all—to know, and that it most properly might remain between them. Mr. Patten, at sight of the papers, exclaimed, perhaps a trifle ambiguously, and by no means clerically, "My eye, what a lark!" and retired, after three cups of tea, in an overcoat bulging with his spoil.

* * *

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II

At ten o'clock that evening the pair separated, as usual on the upper landing, outside their respective doors, for the night; but Miss Amy had hardly set down her candle on her dressing table before she was startled by an extraordinary sound, which appeared to proceed not only from her companion's room, but from her companion's throat. It was something she would have described, had she ever described it, as between a gurgle and a shriek, and it brought Amy Frush, after an interval of stricken stillness that gave her just time to say to herself, "Someone under her bed!," breathlessly and bravely back to the landing. She had not reached it, however, before her neighbor, bursting in, met her and stayed her.

"There's someone in my room!"

They held each other. "But who?"

"A man."

"Under the bed?"

"No—just standing there."

They continued to hold each other, but they rocked. "Standing? Where? How?"

"Why, right in the middle—before my dressing glass."

Amy's blanched face by this time matched her mate's, but its terror was enhanced by speculation. "To look at himself?"

"No—with his back to it. To look at *me,*" poor Susan just audibly breathed. "To keep me off," she quavered. "In strange clothes—of another age; with his head on one side."

Amy wondered. "On one side?"

"Awfully!" the refugee declared while, clinging together, they sounded each other.

This, somehow, for Miss Amy, was the convincing touch; and on it, after a moment, she was capable of the effort of darting back to close her own door. "You'll remain then with me."

"Oh!" Miss Susan wailed with deep assent; quite as if, had she been a slangy person, she would have ejaculated "Rather!" So they spent the night together; with the assumption thus marked, from the first, both that it would have been vain to confront their visitor as they didn't even pretend to each other that they would have confronted a housebreaker; and that by leaving the place at his mercy nothing worse could happen than had already happened. It was Miss Amy's approaching the door again as with intent ear

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and after a hush that had represented between them a deep and extraordinary interchange—it was this that put them promptly face to face with the real character of the occurrence. "Ah," Miss Susan, still under her breath, portentously exclaimed, "it isn't anyone—!"

"No"—her partner was already able magnificently to take her up. "It isn't anyone—"

"Who can really hurt us"—Miss Susan completed her thought. And Miss Amy, as it proved, had been so indescribably prepared that this thought, before morning, had, in the strangest, finest way, made for itself an admirable place with them. The person the elder of our pair had seen in her room was not—well, just simply was not anyone in from outside. He was a different thing altogether. Miss Amy had felt it as soon as she heard her friend's cry and become aware of her commotion; as soon, at all events, as she saw Miss Susan's face. That was all—and there it was. There had been something hitherto wanting, they felt, to their small state and importance; it was present now, and they were as handsomely conscious of it as if they had previously missed it. The element in question, then, was a third person in their association, a hovering presence for the dark hours, a figure that with its head very much—too much—on one side, could be trusted to look at them out of unnatural places; yet only, it doubtless might be assumed, to look at them. They had it at last—had what was to be had in an old house where many, too many, things had happened, where the very walls they touched and floors they trod could have told secrets and named names, where every surface was a blurred mirror of life and death, of the endured, the remembered, the forgotten. Yes; the place was h—, but they stopped at sounding the word. And by morning, wonderful to say, they were used to it—had quite lived into it.

Not only this indeed, but they had their prompt theory. There was a connection between the finding of the box in the vault and the appearance in Miss Susan's room. The heavy air of the past had been stirred by the bringing to light of what had so long been hidden. The communication of the papers to Mr. Patten had had its effect. They faced each other in the morning at breakfast over the certainty that their queer roused inmate was the sign of the violated secret of these relics. No matter; for the sake of the secret they would put up with his attention; and—this, in them, was most beautiful of all—they must, though he was such an addition to

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their grandeur, keep him quite to themselves. Other people might hear of what was in the letters, but they should never hear of *him*. They were not afraid that either of the maids should see him—he was not a matter for maids. The question indeed was whether—should he keep it up long—they themselves would find that they could really live with him. Yet perhaps his keeping it up would be just what would make them indifferent. They turned these things over, but spent the next nights together; and on the third day, in the course of their afternoon walk, descried at a distance the vicar, who, as soon as he saw them, waved his arms violently—either as a warning or as a joke—and came more than halfway to meet them. It was in the middle—or what passed for such—of the big, bleak, blank, melancholy square of Marr; a public place, as it were, of such an absurd capacity for a crowd; with the great ivy-mantled choir and stopped transept of the nobly planned church, telling of how many centuries ago it had, for its part, given up growing.

"Why, my dear ladies," cried Mr. Patten as he approached, "do you know what, of all things in the world, I seem to make out for you from your funny old letters?" Then as they waited, extremely on their guard now: "Neither more nor less, if you please, than that one of your ancestors in the last century—Mr. Cuthbert Frush, it would seem, by name—was hanged."

They never knew afterwards which of the two had first found composure—found even dignity—to respond. "And pray, Mr. Patten, for what?"

"Ah, that's just what I don't yet get hold of. But if you don't mind my digging away"—and the vicar's bushy, jolly brows turned from one of the ladies to the other—"I think I can run it to earth. They hanged, in those days, you know," he added as if he had seen something in their faces, "for almost any trifle!"

"Oh, I hope it wasn't for a trifle!" Miss Susan strangely tittered.

"Yes, of course one would like that, while he was about it—well, it had been, as they say," Mr. Patten laughed, "rather for a sheep than for a lamb!"

"Did they hang at that time for a sheep?" Miss Amy wonderingly asked.

It made their friend laugh again. "The question's whether *he* did! But we'll find out. Upon my word, you know, I quite want to myself. I'm awfully busy, but I think I can promise you that you shall hear. You *don't* mind?" he insisted.

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"I think we could bear *anything*," said Miss Amy.

Miss Susan gazed at her, on this, as for reference and appeal. "And what is he, after all, at this time of day, *to* us?"

Her kinswoman, meeting the eyeglass fixedly, spoke with gravity. "Oh, an ancestor's always an ancestor."

"Well said and well felt, dear lady!" the vicar declared. "Whatever they may have done—"

"It isn't everyone," Miss Amy replied, "that has them to be ashamed of."

"And we're not ashamed *yet!*" Miss Frush jerked out.

"Let me promise you then that you shan't be. Only, for I am busy," said Mr. Patten, "give me time."

"Ah, but we want the truth!" they cried with high emphasis as he quitted them. They were much excited now.

He answered by pulling up and turning round as short as if his professional character had been challenged. "Isn't it just in the truth—and the truth only—that I deal?"

This they recognized as much as his love of a joke, and so they were left there together in the pleasant, if slightly overdone, void of the square, which wore at moments the air of a conscious demonstration, intended as an appeal, of the shrinkage of the population of Marr to a solitary cat. They walked on after a little, but they waited till the vicar was ever so far away before they spoke again; all the more that their doing so must bring them once more to a pause. Then they had a long look. "Hanged!" said Miss Amy—yet almost exultantly.

This was, however, because it was not she who had seen. "That's why his head—" but Miss Susan faltered.

Her companion took it in. "Oh, has such a dreadful twist?"

"It *is* dreadful!" Miss Susan at last dropped, speaking as if she had been present at twenty executions.

There would have been no saying, at any rate, what it didn't evoke from Miss Amy. "It breaks their neck," she contributed after a moment.

Miss Susan looked away. "That's why, I suppose, the head turns so fearfully awry. It's a most peculiar effect."

So peculiar, it might have seemed, that it made them silent afresh. "Well, then, I hope he killed someone!" Miss Amy broke out at last.

Her companion thought, "Wouldn't it depend on whom—?"

"No!" she returned with her characteristic briskness—a brisk-

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ness that set them again into motion.

That Mr. Patten was tremendously busy was evident indeed, as even by the end of the week he had nothing more to impart. The whole thing meanwhile came up again—on the Sunday afternoon; as the younger Miss Frush had been quite confident that, from one day to the other, it must. They went inveterately to evening church, to the close of which supper was postponed; and Miss Susan, on this occasion, ready the first, patiently awaited her mate at the foot of the stairs. Miss Amy at last came down, buttoning a glove, rustling the tail of a frock, and looking, as her kinswoman always thought, conspicuously young and smart. There was no one at Marr, she held, who dressed like her; and Miss Amy, it must be owned, had also settled to this view of Miss Susan, though taking it in a different spirit. Dusk had gathered, but our frugal pair were always tardy lighters, and the grey close of day, in which the elder lady, on a high-backed hall chair, sat with hands patiently folded, had for all cheer, the subdued glow—always subdued—of the small fire in the drawing room, visible through a door that stood open. Into the drawing room Miss Amy passed in search of the prayerbook she had laid down there after morning church, and from it, after a minute, without this volume, she returned to her companion. There was something in her movement that spoke—spoke for a moment so largely that nothing more was said till, with a quick unanimity, they had got themselves straight out of the house. There, before the door, in the cold, still twilight of the winter's end, while the churchbells rang and the windows of the great choir showed across the empty square faintly red, they had it out again. But it was Miss Susan herself, this time, who had to bring it.

"He's there?"

"Before the fire—with his back to it."

"Well, now you see!" Miss Susan exclaimed with elation and as if her friend had hitherto doubted her.

"Yes, I see—and what you mean." Miss Amy was deeply thoughtful.

"About his head?"

"It *is* on one side," Miss Amy went on. "It makes him—" she considered. But she faltered as if still in his presence.

"It makes him awful!" Miss Susan murmured. "The way," she softly moaned, "he looks at you!"

Miss Amy, with a glance, met this recognition. "Yes—doesn't he?" Then her eyes attached themselves to the red windows of the

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church. "But it means something."

"The Lord knows what it means!" her associate gloomily sighed. Then, after an instant, "Did he move?" Miss Susan asked.

"No—and *I* didn't."

"Oh, I did!" Miss Susan declared, recalling her more precipitous retreat.

"I mean I took my time. I waited."

"To see him fade?"

Miss Amy for a moment said nothing. "He doesn't fade. That's *it.*"

"Oh, then you did move!" her relative rejoined.

Again for a little she was silent. "One *has* to. But I don't know what really happened. Of course I came back to you. What I mean is that I took him thoroughly in. He's young," she added.

"But he's *bad!*" said Miss Susan.

"He's handsome!" Miss Amy brought out after a moment. And she showed herself even prepared to continue: "Splendidly."

" 'Splendidly'!—with his neck broken and with that terrible look?"

"It's just the look that makes him so. It's the wonderful eyes. They mean something," Amy Frush brooded.

She spoke with a decision of which Susan presently betrayed the effect. "And what do they mean?"

Her friend had stared again at the glimmering windows of St. Thomas of Canterbury. "That it's time we should get to church."

III

The curate that evening did duty alone; but on the morrow the vicar called and, as soon as he got into the room, let them again have it. "He was hanged for smuggling!"

They stood there before him almost cold in their surprise and diffusing an air in which, somehow, this misdemeanor sounded out as the coarsest of all. *"Smuggling?"* Miss Susan disappointedly echoed—as if it presented itself to the first chill of their apprehension that he had, then, only been vulgar.

"Ah, but they hanged for it freely, you know, and I was an idiot for not having taken it, in his case, for granted. If a man swung, hereabouts, it *was* mostly for that. Don't you know it's on that we stand here today, such as we are—on the fact of what our bold, bad

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forefathers were not afraid of? It's in the floors we walk on and under the roofs that cover us. They smuggled so hard that they never had time to do anything else; and if they broke a head not their own it was only in the awkwardness of landing their brandy kegs. I mean, dear ladies," good Mr. Patten wound up, "no disrespect to *your* forefathers when I tell you that—as I've rather been supposing that, like all the rest of us, you were aware—they conveniently lived by it."

Miss Susan wondered—visibly almost doubted. "Gentlefolks?"

"It was the gentlefolks who were the worst."

"They must have been the bravest!" Miss Amy interjected. She had listened to their visitor's free explanation with a rapid return of color. "And since if they lived by it they also died for it—"

"There's nothing at all to be said against them? I quite agree with you," the vicar laughed, "for all my cloth; and I even go so far as to say, shocking as you may think me, that we owe them, in our shabby little shrunken present, the sense of a bustling background, a sort of undertone of romance. They give us"—he humorously kept it up, verging perilously near, for his cloth, upon positive paradox—"our little handful of legend and our small possibility of ghosts." He paused an instant, with his lighter pulpit manner, but the ladies exchanged no look. They were, in fact, already, with an immense revulsion, carried quite as far away. "Every penny in the place, really, that hasn't been earned by subtler—not nobler—arts in our own virtuous time, and though it's a pity there are not more of 'em: every penny in the place was picked up, somehow, by a clever trick, and at the risk of your neck; when the backs of the king's officers were turned. It's shocking, you know, what I'm saying to you, and I wouldn't say it to everyone, but I think of some of the shabby old things about us, that represent such pickings, with a sort of sneaking kindness—as of relics of our heroic age. What are we now? We were at any rate devils of fellows then!"

Susan Frush considered it all solemnly, struggling with the spell of this evocation. "But must we forget that they were wicked?"

"Never!" Mr. Patten laughed. "Thank you, dear friend, for reminding me. Only I'm worse than they!"

"But would you do it?"

"Murder a coastguard—?" The vicar scratched his head.

"I hope," said Miss Amy rather surprisingly, "you'd defend yourself." And she gave Miss Susan a superior glance. "I would!" she distinctly added.

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Her companion anxiously took it up. "Would you defraud the revenue?"

Miss Amy hesitated but a moment; then with a strange laugh, which she covered, however, by turning instantly away, "Yes!" she remarkably declared.

Their visitor, at this, amused and amusing, eagerly seized her arm. "Then may I count on you on the stroke of midnight to help me—?"

"To help you—?"

"To land the last new Tauchnitz."*

She met the proposal as one whose fancy had kindled, while her cousin watched them as if they had suddenly improvised a drawing room charade. "A service of danger?"

"Under the cliff—when you see the lugger stand in!"

"Armed to the teeth?"

"Yes—but invisibly. Your old waterproof—!"

"Mine is new. I'll take Susan's!"

This good lady, however, had her reserves. "Mayn't one of them, all the same—here and there—have been sorry?"

Mr. Patten wondered. "For the jobs he muffed?"

"For the wrong—as it *was* wrong—he did."

" 'One' of them?" She had gone too far, for the vicar suddenly looked as if he divined in the question a reference.

They became, however, as promptly unanimous in meeting this danger, as to which Miss Susan in particular showed an inspired presence of mind. "Two of them!" she sweetly smiled. "May not Amy and I—?"

"Vicariously repent?" said Mr. Patten. "That depends—for the true honor of Marr—on how you show it."

"Oh, we *shan't* show it!" Miss Amy cried.

"Ah, then," Mr. Patten returned, "though atonements, to be efficient, are supposed to be public, you may do penance in secret as much as you please!"

"Well, *I* shall do it," said Susan Frush.

*By "Tauchnitz," Miss Amy is referring to a series of paperback books published on the Continent. It was illegal to import them into England, but censorship was not the issue. Rather, according to Paul Fussell in Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars, "The series was begun in 1837 by Bernhard Tauchnitz as a way for British and American authors to realize Continental royalties in the days before international copyright. Tauchnitz purchased authors' Continental rights and distributed their works only there, printing on the cover of each volume 'Not to be introduced into the British Empire or the U.S.A.' He was finally distributing the works of over 600 Anglo-American authors."

Sales of those titles in England would, of course, be diminished, to the detriment of British publishers, if the books were obtained on the Continent.—ED.

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Again, by something in her tone, the vicar's attention appeared to be caught. "Have you then in view a particular form—?"

"Of atonement?" She colored now, glaring rather helplessly, in spite of herself, at her companion. "Oh, if you're sincere you'll always find one."

Amy came to her assistance. "The way she often treats me has made her—though there's after all no harm in her—familiar with remorse. Mayn't we, at any rate," the younger lady continued, "now have our letters back?" And the vicar left them with the assurance that they should receive the bundle on the morrow.

They were indeed so at one as to shrouding their mystery that no explicit agreement, no exchange of vows, needed to pass between them; they only settled down, from this moment, to an unshared possession of their secret, an economy in the use and, as may even be said, the enjoyment of it, that was part of their general instinct and habit of thrift. It had been the disposition, the practice, the necessity of each to keep, fairly indeed to clutch, everything that, as they often phrased it, came their way; and this was not the first time such an influence had determined for them an affirmation of property in objects to which ridicule, suspicion, or some other inconvenience might attach. It was their simple philosophy that one never knew of what service an odd object might *not* be; and there were days now on which they felt themselves to have made a better bargain with their aunt's executors than was witnessed in those law papers which they had at first timorously regarded as the record of advantages taken of them in matters of detail. They had got, in short, more than was vulgarly, more than was even shrewdly supposed—such an indescribable unearned increment as might scarce more be divulged as a dread than as a delight. They drew together, old-maidishly, in a suspicious, invidious grasp of the idea that a dread of their very own—and blissfully not, of course, that of a failure of any essential supply—might, on nearer acquaintance, positively turn to a delight.

Upon some such attempted consideration of it, at all events, they found themselves embarking after their last interview with Mr. Patten, and understanding conveyed between them in no redundancy of discussion, no flippant repetitions nor profane recurrences, yet resting on a sense of added margin, of appropriated history, of liberties taken with time and space, that would leave them prepared both for the worst and for the best. The best would be that something that would turn out to their advantage might

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prove to be hidden about the place; the worst would be that they might find themselves growing to depend only too much on excitement. They found themselves amazingly reconciled, on Mr. Patten's information, to the particular character thus fixed on their visitor; they knew by tradition and fiction that even the highwaymen of the same picturesque age were often gallant gentlemen; therefore a smuggler, by such a measure, fairly belonged to the aristocracy of crime. When their packet of documents came back from the vicarage Miss Amy, to whom her associate continued to leave them, took them once more in hand; but with an effect, afresh, of discouragement and languor—a headachy sense of faded ink, of strange spelling and crabbed characters, of allusions she couldn't follow and parts she couldn't match. She placed the tattered papers piously together, wrapping them tenderly in a piece of old figured silken stuff; then, as solemnly as if they had been archives or statues or title deeds, laid them away in one of the several small cupboards lodged in the thickness of the wainscoted walls. What really most sustained our friends in all ways was their consciousness of having, after all—and so contrariwise to what appeared—a man in the house. It removed them from that category of the manless in which no lady really lapses till every issue is closed. Their visitor was an issue—at least to the imagination, and they arrived finally, under provocation, at intensities of flutter in which they felt themselves so compromised by his hoverings that they could only consider with relief the fact of nobody's knowing.

The real complication indeed at first was that for some weeks after their talks with Mr. Patten the hoverings quite ceased; a circumstance that brought home to them in some degree a sense of indiscretion and indelicacy. They hadn't mentioned him, no; but they had come perilously near it, and they had doubtless, at any rate, too recklessly let in the light on old buried and sheltered things, old sorrows and shames. They roamed about the house themselves at times, fitfully and singly, when each supposed the other out or engaged; they paused and lingered, like soundless apparitions, in corners, doorways, passages, and sometimes suddenly met, in these experiments, with a suppressed start and a mute confession. They talked of him practically never; but each knew how the other thought—all the more that it was (oh yes, unmistakably!) in a manner different from her own. They were together, nonetheless, in feeling, while, week after week, he failed again to show, as if they had been guilty of blowing, with an effect

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of sacrilege, on old-gathered silvery ashes. It frankly came out for them that, possessed as they so strangely yet so ridiculously were, they should be able to settle to nothing till their consciousness was yet again confirmed. Whatever the subject of it might have for them of fear or favor, profit or loss, he had taken the taste from everything else. He had converted *them* into wandering ghosts. At last, one day, with nothing they could afterwards perceive to have determined it, the change came—came, as the previous splash in their stillness had come, by the pale testimony of Miss Susan.

She waited till after breakfast to speak of it—or Miss Amy, rather, waited to hear her; for she showed during the meal the face of controlled commotion that her comrade already knew and that must, with the game loyally played, serve as preface to a disclosure. The younger of the friends really watched the elder, over their tea and toast, as if seeing her for the first time as possibly tortuous, suspecting in her some intention of keeping back what had happened. What had happened was that the image of the hanged man had reappeared in the night; yet only after they had moved together to the drawing room did Miss Amy learn the facts.

"I was beside the bed—in that low chair; about"—since Miss Amy must know—"to take off my right shoe. I had noticed nothing before, and had had time partly to undress—had got into my wrapper. So, suddenly—as I happened to look—there he was. And there," said Susan Frush, "he stayed."

"But where do you mean?"

"In the high-backed chair, the old flowered chintz 'ear-chair' beside the chimney."

"All night?—and you in your wrapper?" Then as if this image almost challenged her credulity, "Why didn't you go to bed?" Miss Amy inquired.

"With a—a person in the room?" her friend wonderfully asked; adding after an instant as with positive pride: "I never broke the spell!"

"And didn't freeze to death?"

"Yes, almost. To say nothing of not having slept, I can assure you, one wink. I shut my eyes for long stretches, but whenever I opened them he was still there, and I never for a moment lost consciousness."

Miss Amy gave a groan of conscientious sympathy. "So that you're feeling now, of course, half dead."

Her companion turned to the chimney glass a wan, glazed eye.

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"I dare say I *am* looking impossible."

Miss Amy, after an instant, found herself still conscientious. "You are." Her own eyes strayed to the glass, lingering there while she lost herself in thought. "Really," she reflected with a certain dryness, "if that's the kind of thing it's to be—!" there would seem, in a word, to be no withstanding it for either. Why, she afterwards asked herself in secret, should the restless spirit of a dead adventurer have addressed itself in its trouble to such a person as her queer, quaint, inefficient housemate? It was in *her,* she dumbly and somehow sorely argued, that an unappeased soul of the old race should show a confidence. To this conviction she was the more directed by the sense that Susan had, in relation to the preference shown, vain and foolish complacencies. She had her idea of what, in their prodigious predicament, should be, as she called it, "done," and that was a question that Amy from this time began to nurse the small aggression of not so much as discussing with her. She had certainly, poor Miss Frush, a new, an obscure reticence, and since she wouldn't speak first she should have silence to her fill. Miss Amy, however, peopled the silence with conjectural visions of her kinswoman's secret communion. Miss Susan, it was true, showed nothing, on any particular occasion, more than usual; but this was just a part of the very felicity that had begun to harden and uplift her. Days and nights hereupon elapsed without bringing felicity of any order to Amy Frush. If she had no emotions it was, she suspected, because Susan had them all; and—it would have been preposterous had it not been pathetic—she proceeded rapidly to hug the opinion that Susan was selfish and even something of a sneak. Politeness, between them, still reigned, but confidence had flown, and its place was taken by open ceremonies and confessed precautions. Miss Susan looked blank but resigned; which maintained again, unfortunately, her superior air and the presumption of her duplicity. Her manner was of not knowing where her friend's shoe pinched; but it might have been taken by a jaundiced eye for surprise at the challenge of her monopoly. The unexpected resistance of her nerves was indeed a wonder: was that, then, the result, even for a shaky old woman, of shocks sufficiently repeated? Miss Amy brooded on the rich inference that, if the first of them didn't prostrate and the rest didn't undermine, one might keep them up as easily as—well, say an unavowed acquaintance or a private commerce of letters. She was startled at the comparison into which she fell—but what was this but an intrigue like another? And

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fancy Susan carrying one on! That history of the long night hours of the pair in the two chairs kept before her—for it was always present—the extraordinary measure. Was the situation it involved only grotesque—or was it quite grimly grand? It struck her as both; but that was the case with all their situations. Would it be in herself, at any rate, to show such a front? She put herself such questions till she was tired of them. A few good moments of her own would have cleared the air. Luckily they were to come.

IV

It was on a Sunday morning in April, a day brimming over with the turn of the season. She had gone into the garden before church; they cherished alike, with pottering intimacies and opposed theories and a wonderful apparatus of old gloves and trowels and spuds and little botanical cards on sticks, this feature of their establishment, where they could still differ without fear and agree without diplomacy, and which now, with its vernal promise, threw beauty and gloom and light and space, a great good-natured ease, into their wavering scales. She was dressed for church; but when Susan, who had, from a window, seen her wandering, stooping, examining, touching, appeared in the doorway to signify a like readiness, she suddenly felt her intention checked. "Thank you," she said, drawing near; "I think that, though I've dressed, I won't, after all, go. Please, therefore, proceed without me."

Miss Susan fixed her. "You're not well?"

"Not particularly. I shall be better—the morning's so perfect—here."

"Are you really ill?"

"Indisposed; but not enough so, thank you, for you to stay with me."

"Then it has come on but just now?"

"No—I felt not quite fit when I dressed. But it won't do."

"Yet you'll stay out here?"

Miss Amy looked about. "It will depend!"

Her friend paused long enough to have asked what it would depend on, but abruptly, after this contemplation, turned instead and, merely throwing over her shoulder an "At least take care of yourself," went rustling, in her stiffest Sunday fashion, about her business. Miss Amy, left alone, as she clearly desired to be, lingered awhile in the garden, where the sense of things was somehow made

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still more delicious by the sweet, vain sounds from the church tower; but by the end of ten minutes she had returned to the house. The sense of things was not delicious there, for what it had at last come to was that, as they thought of each other what they couldn't say, all their contacts were hard and false. The real wrong was in what Susan thought—as to which she was much too proud and too sore to undeceive her. Miss Amy went vaguely to the drawing room.

They sat, as usual, after church, at their early Sunday dinner, face to face; but little passed between them save that Miss Amy felt better, that the curate had preached, that nobody else had stayed away, and that everybody had asked why Amy had. Amy, hereupon, satisfied everybody by feeling well enough to go in the afternoon; on which occasion, on the other hand—and for reasons even less luminous than those that had operated with her mate in the morning—Miss Susan remained within. Her comrade came back late, having, after church, paid visits; and found her, as daylight faded, seated in the drawing room, placid and dressed, but without so much as a Sunday book—the place contained whole shelves of such reading—in her hand. She looked so as if a visitor had just left her that Amy put the question: "Has anyone called?"

"Dear, no; I've been quite alone."

This again was indirect, and it instantly determined for Miss Amy a conviction—a conviction that, on her also sitting down just as she was and in a silence that prolonged itself, promoted in its turn another determination. The April dusk gathered, and still, without further speech, the companions sat there. But at last Miss Amy said in a tone not quite her commonest: "This morning he came—while you were at church. I suppose it must have been really—though of course I couldn't know it—what I was moved to stay at home for." She spoke now—out of her contentment—as if to oblige with explanations.

But it was strange how Miss Susan met her. "You stay at home for him? *I* don't!" She fairly laughed at the triviality of the idea.

Miss Amy was naturally struck by it and after an instant even nettled. "Then why did you do so this afternoon?"

"Oh, it wasn't for *that!*" Miss Susan lightly quavered. She made her distinction. "I *really* wasn't well."

At this her cousin brought it out. "But he has been with you?"

"My dear child," said Susan, launched unexpectedly even to herself, "he's with me so often that if I put myself out for him—!" But

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as if at sight of something that showed, through the twilight, in her friend's face, she pulled herself up.

Amy, however, spoke with studied stillness. "You've ceased then to put yourself out? You gave me, you remember, an instance of how you once did!" And she tried, on her side, a laugh.

"Oh yes—that was at first. But I've seen such a lot of him since. Do you mean *you* hadn't?" Susan asked. Then as her companion only sat looking at her: "Has this been really the first time for you—since we last talked?"

Miss Amy for a minute said nothing. "You've actually believed me—"

"To be enjoying on your own account what *I* enjoy? How couldn't I, at the very least," Miss Susan cried—"so grand and strange as you must allow me to say you've struck me?"

Amy hesitated. "I hope I've sometimes struck you as decent!"

But it was a touch that, in her friend's almost amused preoccupation with the simple fact, happily fell short. "You've only been waiting for what didn't come?"

Miss Amy colored in the dusk. "It came, as I tell you, today."

"Better late than never!" And Miss Susan got up.

Amy Frush sat looking. "It's because you thought you had ground for jealousy that *you've* been extraordinary?"

Poor Susan, at this, quite bounced about. "Jealousy?"

It was a tone—never heard from her before—that brought Amy Frush to her feet; so that for a minute, in the unlighted room where, in honor of the spring, there had been no fire and the evening chill had gathered, they stood as enemies. It lasted, fortunately, even long enough to give one of them time suddenly to find it horrible. "But why should we quarrel *now?*" Amy broke out in a different voice.

Susan was not too alienated quickly enough to meet it. "It *is* rather wretched."

"Now when we're equal," Amy went on.

"Yes—I suppose we are." Then, however, as if just to attenuate the admission, Susan had her last lapse from grace. "They say, you know, that when women do quarrel it's usually about a man."

Amy recognized it, but also with a reserve. "Well, then, let there first *be* one!"

"And don't you call *him—?*"

"No!" Amy declared and turned away, while her companion showed her a vain wonder for what she could in that case have

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expected. Their identity of privilege was thus established, but it is not certain that the air with which she indicated that the subject had better drop didn't press down for an instant her side of the balance. She knew that she knew most about men.

The subject did drop for the time, it being agreed between them that neither should from that hour expect from the other any confession or report. They would treat all occurrences now as not worth mentioning—a course easy to pursue from the moment the suspicion of jealousy had, on each side, been so completely laid to rest. They led their life a month or two on the smooth ground of taking everything for granted; by the end of which time, however, try as they would, they had set up no question that—while they met as a pair of gentlewomen living together only must meet—could successfully pretend to take the place of that of Cuthbert Frush. The spring softened and deepened, reached out its tender arms and scattered its shy graces; the earth broke, the air stirred, with emanations that were as touches and voices of the past; our friends bent their backs in their garden and their noses over its symptoms; they opened their windows to the mildness and tracked it in the lanes and by the hedges; yet the plant of conversation between them markedly failed to renew itself with the rest. It was not indeed that the mildness was not within them as well as without; all asperity, at least, had melted away; they were more than ever pleased with their general acquisition, which, at the winter's end, seemed to give out more of its old secrets, to hum, however faintly, with more of its old echoes, to creak, here and there, with the expiring throb of old aches. The deepest sweetness of the spring at Marr was just in its being in this way an attestation of age and rest. The place never seemed to have lived and lingered so long as when kind nature, like a maiden blessing a crone, laid rosy hands on its grizzled head. Then the new season was a light held up to show all the dignity of the years, but also all the wrinkles and scars. The good ladies in whom we are interested changed, at any rate, with the happy days, and it finally came out not only that the invidious note had dropped, but that it had positively turned to music. The whole tone of the time made so for tenderness that it really seemed as if at moments they were sad for each other. They had their grounds at last; each found them in her own consciousness; but it was as if each waited, on the other hand, to be sure she could speak without offense. Fortunately, at last, the tense cord snapped.

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The old churchyard at Marr is still liberal; it does its immemorial utmost to people, with names and dates and memories and eulogies, with generations foreshortened and confounded, the high empty table at which the grand old cripple of the church looks down over the low wall. It serves as an easy thoroughfare, and the stranger finds himself pausing in it with a sense of respect and compassion for the great maimed, ivied shoulders—as the image strikes him—of stone. Miss Susan and Miss Amy were strangers enough still to have sunk down one May morning on the sun-warmed tablet of an ancient tomb and to have remained looking about them in a sort of anxious peace. Their walks were all pointless now, as if they always stopped and turned, for an unconfessed want of interest, before reaching their object. That object presented itself at every start as the same to each, but they had come back too often without having got near it. This morning, strangely, on the return and almost in sight of their door, they were more in presence of it than they had ever been, and they seemed fairly to touch it when Susan said at last, quite in the air and with no traceable reference: "I hope you don't mind, dearest, if I'm awfully sorry for you."

"Oh, I know it," Amy returned—"I've felt it. But what does it do for us?" she asked.

Then Susan saw, with wonder and pity, how little resentment for penetration or patronage she had had to fear and out of what a depth of sentiment similar to her own her companion helplessly spoke. "You're sorry for *me?"*

Amy at first only looked at her with tired eyes, putting out a hand that remained awhile on her arm. "Dear old girl! You might have told me before," she went on as she took everything in; "though, after all, haven't we each really known it?"

"Well," said Susan, "we've waited. We could only wait."

"Then if we've waited together," her friend returned, "that *has* helped us."

"Yes—to keep him in his place. Who would ever believe in him?" Miss Susan wearily wondered. "If it wasn't for you and for me—"

"Not doubting of each other?"—her companion took her up; "yes, there wouldn't be a creature. It's lucky for us," said Miss Amy, "that we *don't* doubt."

"Oh, if we did we shouldn't be sorry."

"No—except, selfishly, for ourselves. I am, I assure you, for *my*self—it has made me older. But, luckily, at any rate, we trust each

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other."

"We do," said Miss Susan.

"We do," Miss Amy repeated—they lingered a little on that. "But except making one feel older, what has it done for one?"

"There it is!"

"And though we've kept him in his place," Miss Amy continued, "he has also kept us in ours. We've lived with it," she declared in melancholy justice. "And we wondered at first if we could!" she ironically added. "Well, isn't just what we feel now that we can't any longer?"

"No—it must stop. And I've my idea," said Susan Frush.

"Oh, I assure you I've mine!" her cousin responded.

"Then if you want to act, don't mind me."

"Because you certainly won't *me?* No, I suppose not. Well!" Amy sighed, as if, merely from this, relief had at last come. Her comrade echoed it; they remained side by side; and nothing could have had more oddity than what was assumed alike in what they had said and in what they still kept back. There would have been this at least in their favour for a questioner of their case, that each, charged dejectedly with her own experience, took, on the part of the other, the extraordinary—the ineffable, in fact—all for granted. They never named it again—as indeed it was not easy to name; the whole matter shrouded itself in personal discriminations and privacies; the comparison of notes had become a thing impossible. What was definite was that they had lived into their queer story, passed through it as through an observed, a studied, eclipse of the usual, a period of reclusion, a financial, social, or moral crisis, and only desired now to live out of it again. The questioner we have been supposing might even have fancied that each, on her side, had hoped for something from it that she finally perceived it was never to give, which would have been exactly, moreover, the core of her secret and the explanation of her reserve. They, at least, as the business stood, put each other to no test, and, if they were in fact disillusioned and disappointed, came together, after their long blight, solidly on that. It fully appeared between them that they felt a great deal older. When they got up from their sun-warmed slab, however, reminding each other of luncheon, it was with a visible increase of ease and with Miss Susan's hand drawn, for the walk home, into Miss Amy's arm. Thus the "idea" of each had continued unspoken and ungrudged. It was as if each wished the other to try her own first; from which it might have been

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gathered that they alike presented difficulty and even entailed expense. The great questions remained. What then did he mean? what then did he want? Absolution, peace, rest, his final reprieve—merely to say *that* saw them no further on the way than they had already come. What were they at last to do for him? What could they give him that he would take? The ideas they respectively nursed still bore no fruit, and at the end of another month Miss Susan was frankly anxious about Miss Amy. Miss Amy as freely admitted that people *must* have begun to notice strange marks in them and to look for reasons. They were changed—they must change back.

V

Yet it was not till one morning at midsummer, on their meeting for breakfast, that the elder lady fairly attacked the younger's last entrenchment. Poor, poor Susan! Miss Amy had said to herself as her cousin came into the room; and a moment later she brought out, for very pity, her appeal. "What then *is* yours?"

"My idea?" It was clearly, at last, a vague comfort to Miss Susan to be asked. Yet her answer was desolate. "Oh, it's no use!"

"But how do you know?"

"Why, I tried it—ten days ago, and I thought at first it had answered. But it hasn't."

"He's back again?"

Wan, tired, Miss Susan gave it up. "Back again."

Miss Amy, after one of the long, odd looks that had now become their most frequent form of intercourse, thought it over. "And just the same?"

"Worse."

"Dear!" said Miss Amy, clearly knowing what that meant. "Then what did you do?"

Her friend brought it roundly out. "I made my sacrifice."

Miss Amy, though still more deeply interrogative, hesitated. "But of what?"

"Why, of my little all—or almost."

The "almost" seemed to puzzle Miss Amy, who, moreover, had plainly no clue to the property or attribute so described. "Your 'little all'?"

"Twenty pounds."

"Money?" Miss Amy gasped.

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Her tone produced on her companion's part a wonder as great as her own. "What then is it yours to give?"

"My idea? It's not to *give!*" cried Amy Frush.

At the finer pride that broke out in this, poor Susan's blankness flushed. "What then is it to do?"

But Miss Amy's bewilderment outlasted her reproach. "Do you mean he takes money?"

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer does—for 'conscience.' "

Her friend's exploit shone larger. "Conscience money? You sent it to Government?" Then while, as the effect of her surprise, her mate looked too much a fool, Amy melted to kindness. "Why, you secretive old thing!"

Miss Susan presently pulled herself more together. "When your ancestor has robbed the revenue and his spirit walks for remorse—"

"You pay to get rid of him? I see—and it becomes what the vicar called his atonement by deputy. But what if it isn't remorse?" Miss Amy shrewdly asked.

"But it *is*—or it seemed to me so."

"Never to me," said Miss Amy.

Again they searched each other. "Then, evidently, with you he's different."

Miss Amy looked away. "I dare say!"

"So what *is* your idea?"

Miss Amy thought. "I'll tell you only if it works."

"Then, for God's sake, try it!"

Miss Amy, still with averted eyes and now looking easily wise, continued to think. "To try it I shall have to leave you. That's why I've waited so long." Then she fully turned, and with expression: "Can you face three days alone?"

"Oh—'alone'! I wish I ever were!"

At this her friend, as for very compassion, kissed her; for it seemed really to have come out at last—and welcome!—that poor Susan was the worse beset. "I'll do it! But I must go up to town. Ask me no questions. All I can tell you now is—"

"Well?" Susan appealed while Amy impressively fixed her.

"It's no more remorse than *I'm* a smuggler."

"What is it then?"

"It's bravado."

An "Oh!" more shocked and scared than any that, in the whole business, had yet dropped from her, wound up poor Susan's share

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in this agreement, appearing as it did to represent for her a somewhat lurid inference. Amy, clearly, had lights of her own. It was by their aid, accordingly, that she immediately prepared for the first separation they had had yet to suffer; of which the consequence, two days later, was that Miss Susan, bowed and anxious, crept singly, on the return from their parting, up the steep hill that leads from the station of Marr and passed ruefully under the ruined town gate, one of the old defenses, that arches over it.

But the full sequel was not for a month—one hot August night when, under the dim stars, they sat together in their little walled garden. Though they had by this time, in general, found again—as women only can find—the secret of easy speech, nothing, for the half hour, had passed between them: Susan had only sat waiting for her comrade to wake up. Miss Amy had taken of late to interminable dozing—as if with forfeits and arrears to recover; she might have been a convalescent from fever repairing tissue and getting through time. Susan Frush watched her in the warm dimness, and the question between them was fortunately at last so simple that she had freedom to think her pretty in slumber and to fear that she herself, so unguarded, presented an appearance less graceful. She was impatient, for her need had at last come, but she waited, and while she waited she thought. She had already often done so, but the mystery deepened tonight in the story told, as it seemed to her by her companion's frequent relapses. What had been, three weeks before, the effort intense enough to leave behind such a trail of fatigue? The marks, sure enough, had shown in the poor girl that morning of the termination of the arranged absence for which not three days, but ten, without word or sign, were to prove no more than sufficient. It was at an unnatural hour that Amy had turned up, dusty, disheveled, inscrutable, confessing for the time to nothing more than a long night journey. Miss Susan prided herself on having played the game and respected, however tormenting, the conditions. She had her conviction that her friend had been out of the country, and she marveled, thinking of her own old wanderings and her present settled fears, at the spirit with which a person who, whatever she had previously done, had not traveled, could carry off such a flight. The hour had come at last for this person to name her remedy. What determined it was that as Susan Frush sat there, she took home the fact that the remedy was by this time not to be questioned. It had acted as her own had not, and Amy, to all appearance, had only waited for her to admit

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it. Well, she was ready when Amy woke—woke immediately to meet her eyes and to show, after a moment, in doing so, a vision of what was in her mind. "What *was* it now?" Susan finally said.

"My idea? Is it possible you've not guessed?"

"Oh, you're deeper, much deeper," Susan sighed, "than I."

Amy didn't contradict that—seemed indeed, placidly enough, to take it for truth; but she presently spoke as if the difference, after all, didn't matter now. "Happily for us today—isn't it so?—our case is the same. I can speak, at any rate, for myself. He has left me."

"Thank God, then!" Miss Susan devoutly murmured. "For he has left *me.*"

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, I think so."

"But how?"

"Well," said Miss Susan after an hesitation, "how are *you?*"

Amy, for a little, matched her pause. "Ah, that's what I can't tell you. I can only answer for it that he's gone."

"Then allow me also to prefer not to explain. The sense of relief has for some reason grown strong in me during the last half hour. That's such a comfort that it's enough, isn't it?"

"Oh, plenty!" The garden side of their old house, a window or two dimly lighted, massed itself darkly in the summer night, and, with a common impulse, they gave it, across the little lawn, a long, fond look. Yes, they could be sure. "Plenty!" Amy repeated. "He's gone."

Susan's elder eyes hovered, in the same way, through her elegant glass, at his purified haunt. "He's gone. And how," she insisted, "*did* you do it?"

"Why, you dear goose"—Miss Amy spoke a little strangely—"I went to Paris."

"To Paris?"

"To see what I could bring back—that I mightn't, that I shouldn't. To do a stroke with!" Miss Amy brought out.

But it left her friend still vague. "A stroke—?"

"To get through the Customs—under their nose."

It was only with this that, for Miss Susan, a pale light dawned. "You wanted to smuggle? *That* was your idea?"

"It was *his,*" said Miss Amy. "He wanted no 'conscience money' spent for him," she now more bravely laughed; "it was quite the other way about—he wanted some bold deed done, of the old wild kind; he wanted some big risk taken. And I took it." She sprang

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up, rebounding, in her triumph.

Her companion, gasping, gazed at her. "Might they have hanged you too?"

Miss Amy looked up at the dim stars. "If I had defended myself. But luckily it didn't come to that. What I brought in I brought"—she rang out, more and more lucid, now, as she talked—"triumphantly. To appease him—I braved them. I chanced it, at Dover, and they never knew."

"Then you hid it—?"

"About my person."

With the shiver of this Miss Susan got up, and they stood there duskily together. "It was so small?" the elder lady wonderingly murmured.

"It was big enough to have satisfied him," her mate replied with just a shade of sharpness. "I chose it, with much thought, from the forbidden list."

The forbidden list hung a moment in Miss Susan's eyes, suggesting to her, however, but a pale conjecture. "A Tauchnitz?"

Miss Amy communed again with the August stars. "It was the *spirit* of the dead that told."

"A Tauchnitz?" her friend insisted.

Then at last her eyes again dropped, and the Misses Frush moved together to the house. "Well, he's satisfied."

"Yes, and"—Miss Susan mused a little ruefully as they went—"you got at last your week in Paris!"

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

The course of the wires is as follows:

A—Right Lav., cross through Library, right up passage and past Study door.

B—Lobby, Waiting Room, Kitchen, Pantries, Outer Corridor.

C—Upper Gallery, second passage on right, round Kitchen, round Cellar stairs, Scullery, Verandah.

D—Lower Gallery, Alcove.

E—Left Lav., Lounge, Dining Room, Sitting Room, passage to Cellars.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



J. A. JANCE

Photo by Alice Volpe

We know that J. A. Jance's homicide detective, J. P. "Beau" Beaumont, is divorced, that he seems to be attractive to women, that he drinks (often to excess), and that he is a good cop. His personality comes through best in his evaluations of others—the people he works with, his friends and acquaintances. His personal appearance, however, is not very well delineated. Perhaps it doesn't need to be in this first-person series about homicide police in the Seattle area.

In the first book, Beaumont's partner, Ron Peters, is a new man on the Seattle PD homicide squad. He reminds Beaumont "of an Irish setter—tall, reddish hair, good-looking, loose-jointed, not too bright at times." He and Peters "don't exactly see eye to eye on food. Peters is an enzyme nut. He eats sprouts and seeds . . . He avoids sugar and salt. He consumes little red meat and can declaim for hours on the evils of caffeine." Beaumont has a lot of trouble with these idiosyncrasies in *Until Proven Guilty*—trouble he attributes to the woes of breaking in a new partner.

When a young child is murdered, and Beaumont and Peters have to interview the mother, a member of a religious sect, he finds there is more to Peters than meets the eye. Peters' wife has taken his two little girls off to live in a similar sect, and he is really torn up about it. It affects the approach he takes to the crime, and to people in general.

Peters is not the only partner Beaumont has in the nine-book series. When, in the third book,

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Trial by Fury, Peters is seriously wounded, Beaumont must investigate without a regular partner. In *Taking the Fifth,* he takes on as his partner Detective Allen (Big Al) Lindstrom, a force veteran who had appeared briefly in the previous three books. Peters is still a recurring character, though. Beaumont fills Ron in on all his investigations while Ron is in intensive care, and then, when he is in rehab, Peters assists by doing various telephone checks and paper searches. When he has recovered enough to work (he is a quadriplegic as a result of his injury) and is assigned to public relations, he still helps out in Beaumont's investigations.

A lot of officers are uncomfortable with Beaumont. It seems that, in the course of his investigation into the child-killing in *Until Proven Guilty,* Beau met Anne Corley. Anne drove a bright red Porsche, was obviously wealthy, and was on the scene because she was writing a book about crimes associated with children. Beau fell for Anne in a bad way, and they married. This marriage, and Anne's subsequent death, leave Beau a rich man who has enough money to quit the force, a reputation as a "playboy cop" (even if that reputation is undeserved), and a serious drinking problem.

Beau now owns a penthouse apartment in a condo (of which building he is part owner), drives Anne's Porsche, and uses his money to pay for Peters' medical treatment. In the second book of the series, *Injustice for All,* when he discovers how much money he has, Beau has his lawyer use as much as necessary to get Peters' kids back from the commune. While Peters is hospitalized, he puts up the two girls and Peters' housekeeper, Mrs. Edwards, in an apartment in that same condo and acts as surrogate father to the girls while Peters is in the rehab center.

Ralph Ames is a lawyer from Phoenix; he was Anne Corley's lawyer. He is now Beau's lawyer and administers his extensive estate for him. Ralph may be the only person who truly understands how much Anne meant to Beau, and Ralph is the only one who seems to worry about Beau's self-destructive behavior. This behavior has several roots, but they all end up with Beau drinking too much (he prefers McNaughton's) and having blackouts. It is Ralph who arranges for Beau to "dry out" at an exclusive spa in the Phoenix area in *Minor in Possession,* Beau's only investigative foray out of the state of Washington.

Beau is illegitimate. His mother fell in love with a young

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soldier, who was killed in an accident on his way to marry her. She was pregnant, and this soldier was unacceptable to her family; even though she named Beau after her father (the J. P. stands for Jonas Piedmont; the Beaumont for the Texas town the young soldier hailed from), the family completely cut her off. Beau loved his mother dearly and never forgave his grandparents for forcing her to raise a child alone. It is not until *Payment in Kind* that he finally gets up the courage to visit the grandparents he has never met.

Maxwell Cole is another recurring character in the series—a reporter who really has it in for Beau. And for a not particularly good reason. Cole hates cops, cops of all kinds, but he particularly hates Beau because Beau married the girl, Karen Moffit, that Cole wanted to marry. It doesn't seem to matter that Karen subsequently divorced Beau to marry a shoe salesman from California (we meet her, the shoe salesman, and Beau's two kids, Kelly and Scott, in *Minor in Possession).*

The setting of the J. P. Beaumont series is the city of Seattle, and it may be the portrayal of this city that makes Jance's series so popular in the Pacific Northwest. All the investigations take place in and around Seattle except *Minor in Possession.*

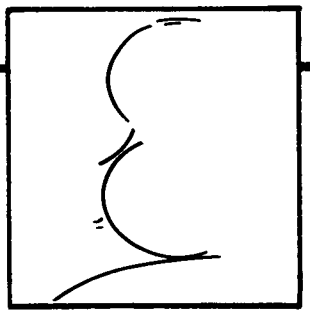
The locations are exceptionally well described, from the gritty suburban decay of the Gay Avenue location of the Faith Tabernacle in Magnolia, an otherwise upscale Seattle neighborhood, in *Until Proven Guilty,* to the more rural setting of Peters' house in Kirkland in *Injustice for All.*

The series consists of nine Avon paperback originals, the first two printed in extremely small type: *Until Proven Guilty* (1985), *Injustice for All* (1986), *Trial by Fury* (1986), *Taking the Fifth* (1987), *Improbable Cause* (1988), *A More Perfect Union* (1988), *Dismissed with Prejudice* (1989), *Minor in Possession,* (1990), and *Payment in Kind* (1991). There are a few irritating aspects to the series, such as Beau's inability or unwillingness to deal with Cole, his tendency to get involved with women in an investigation, and his constant conflicts with his fellow officers, especially his superior officers. Most of this, in normal police practice, would probably get him thrown off the force. But then, if any police procedural series accurately portrayed police procedure at all times, most readers wouldn't be interested—too dull. J. A. Jance's series is *anything* but dull.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Publicity about a crime or a series of crimes may spur what's called a copycat crime. The same is true of movies. Recently, we saw the heart-pounding, innovative killer-thriller *Dead Again* (AHMM, Mid-December, 1991), in which the plot revolved around a pretty amnesia victim and the identity crises her presence creates. It was followed by *Deceived* (AHMM, January, 1992), a forgettable suspense film starring Goldie Hawn. That one skipped the amnesia but went for the identity mystery. Now we have **Shattered,** which gives us a handsome amnesia victim (Tom Berenger) as well as an identity crisis and a murder mystery.

Dan Merrick is a high-powered San Francisco architect who barely survives when his car fails to navigate a hairpin turn and flies over a cliff. His wife Judith (Greta Scaachi) is thrown from the car early in its descent and walks out of the hospital only hours later. Merrick is not so lucky—he not only loses his memory but he also loses his face, and plastic surgeons are forced to perform a series of delicate operations to restore his good looks.

As he learns from his wife who he is and was, so do we. For one thing, he's fabulously wealthy. He and his buddy Jeb Scott (Corbin Bernsen) are partners in a development firm that is poised to make extremely large amounts of money with a fancy marina project in a seedy waterfront area by the Golden Gate Bridge.

From everything Merrick learns, he is one lucky guy. In addition to his riches, his good fortune includes a voluptuous and caring wife, who painstakingly nurses him back to health. And he's got good

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friends, too, in Jeb and Jeb's wife Jenny.

But all is not well in this wonderful life. Merrick has scary and bewildering flashbacks. He discovers pictures of his wife in a compromising position with another man. His friends tell him his marriage was troubled.

Something is wrong, although we don't quite know what. Something happened, although we're not sure what it was. And there's a reason the wrong things happened, but we don't know what it is.

Merrick needs outside help in putting together the pieces of his shattered life and in solving these mysteries. He turns to private detective Gus Klein (Bob Hoskins), an asthmatic whose office is the back of a pet shop. Klein is a rumpled man who favors Yankee caps and old clothing, a telephoto lens and a telephone tap. He puts on his gumshoes only to pay the rent and feed the animals. He is good at what he does, however, and sympathetic to Merrick's problems. The two have good rapport, unlike Merrick and Jeb, who is pretty much a money-grubbing sleaze.

Hoskins adds an element of fun to *Shattered,* which may otherwise have been too dark a film. His character is similar to the one he played in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit.*

Berenger is good at producing the perplexed expression neccessary for a character who has no memory. He seems likeable enough for us to wonder why anything as bad as that terrible car crash has befallen him. And we hope he can get his life back in order.

Greta Scaachi, as apparently caring, is sexy and attractive but not quite compelling. She goes through much of the movie pretty blandly—until the end, that is.

More interesting is Joanne Whalley-Kilmer, who plays Merrick's friend Jenny Scott, a palm reader. She offers a dark, brooding presence, always warning Merrick about something bad that has happened or is about to happen.Corbin Bernsen plays the jerk of a friend and partner convincingly.

The start of the film, showing no actors but only a fog enshrouded, twisting mountain road from behind the windshield of a moving car, sets a mood of impending mystery. The use of slow motion flashbacks—particularly the repeated showing of a shattering windshield—is effective in gradually revealing what took place prior to the accident.

All in all, rate this much better than *Deceived,* but not nearly as good as *Dead Again.*

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THE STORY THAT WON



Photo by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by D. J. Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Honorable mentions go to J. E. Baity of Solana Beach, California; C. D. Longoria of Arlington, Texas; Katherine Marcella of Huntsville, Alabama; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Bob Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; Joy Hewitt Mann of Spencerville, Ontario, Canada; Michele Tessler of The Bronx, New York; Hendrica Kovacs of Rexdale, Ontario, Canada; Barbara Allen of College Park, Maryland; and Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

SMART BOMB? by D. J. Bart

The newly appointed ambassador to Turkey was looking up at the tops of the ancient buildings in the old section of downtown Ankara. "I don't see any crane," he complained.

Filbert, from the CIA (known to his associates as a real nut), shook his head. "Not that kind of crane, ambassador," he said exasperatedly, "*that kind*." He pointed to a flagstone plaza, partially shadowed, with an old woman making her way home and a large white bird walking stiltedly from shadow to sunlight.

"Is that a crane or a stork?" the ambassador asked.

Filbert glanced at the older man. "Whichever it is," he began with a sigh, "that's the secret weapon."

The silver-haired ambassador looked at the CIA agent and grinned. "You're putting me on."

Shaking his head, Filbert said, "Saddam Hussein is having them smuggled illegally into Turkey and Syria and then trained to become political assassins by a splinter group of the PLO."

"And he got the idea from a Daphne Du Maurier novella?"

Filbert nodded. "That's our intelligence," he murmured, looking somewhat bemused, then added, "You know, that *must* be a stork."

"Why?"

"It's the way they use them for assassination . . . the bird flies to the building the target is in and drops a baby-doll down the chimney . . . except it's a bomb," Filbert replied, reaching inside his coat.

"That's in the Du Maurier story?" the ambassador inquired.

Filbert shrugged as he sighted down the barrel of his silenced automatic at the large bird.

"Beats me."

NOTE: The photo above, by Elliott Erwitt, was incorrectly attributed in the October issue to Algimantas Kezys.—ED.

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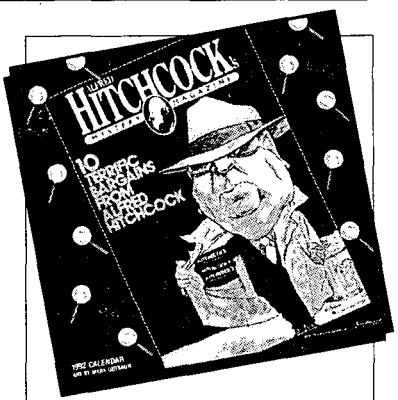
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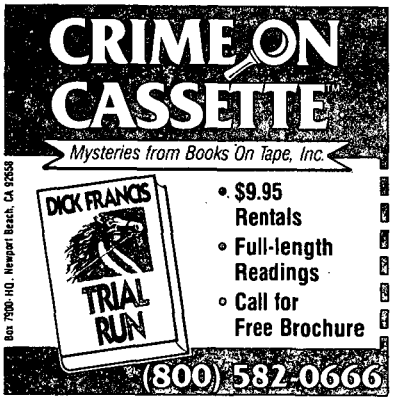
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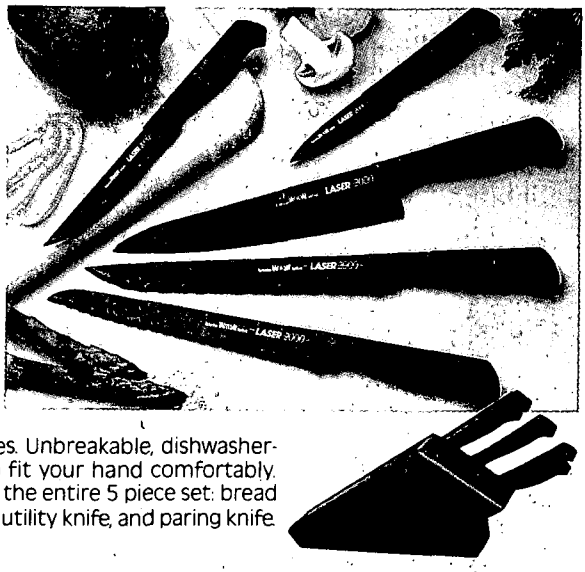
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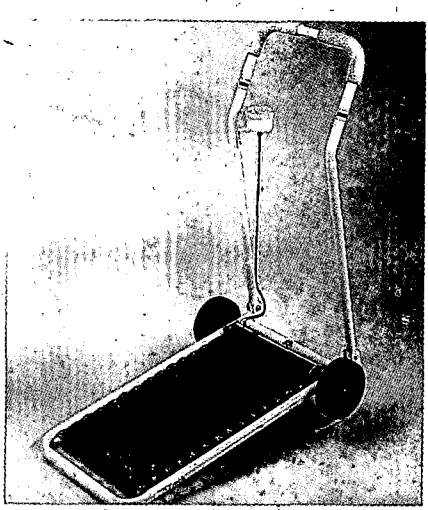
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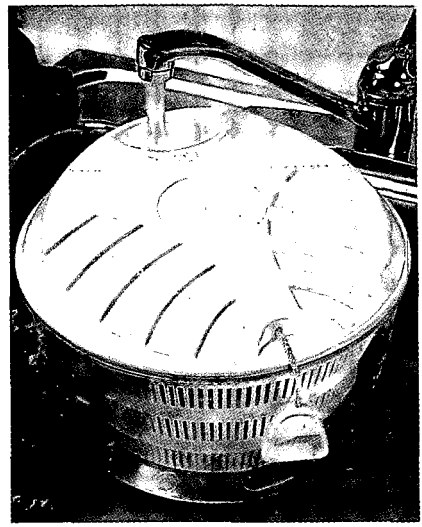


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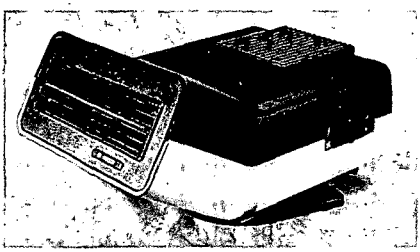
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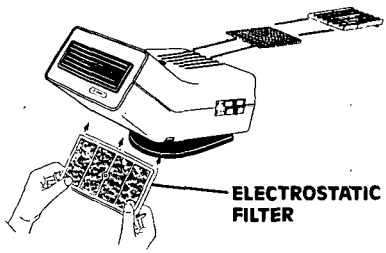
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